



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

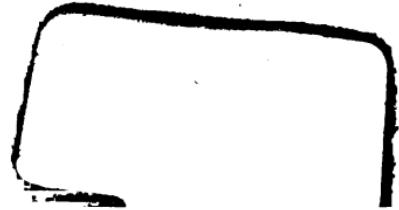
About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES



3 3433 07481329 0



W.E.C.

1







IMAGINARY OBLIGATIONS

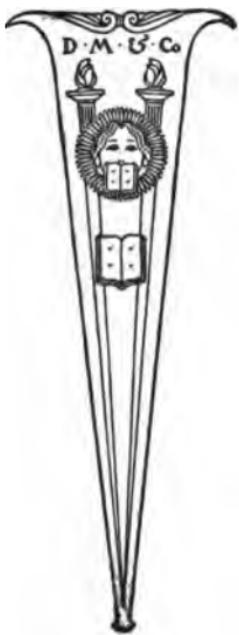


71072A
5/10/08
64.

IMAGINARY OBLIGATIONS

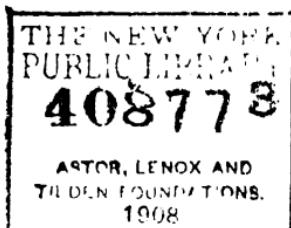
By

FRANK MOORE COLBY



NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD & COMPANY

1905



Copyright, 1904
By DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY

Published September, 1904

P R E F A C E

I **PRESUME** it will not be denied that the Anglo-Saxon conscience is apt to encroach on the zone of moral indifference. We are a hortatory people, forever laying down the law in a region where diversity is most desirable. Apparently we would rather teach than live; we count votes even in our dreams; and we suppress nine-tenths of our thoughts for fear of seeming incorrect. We are sometimes frank in private, but *coram populo* our souls are not our own. In proof whereof see any magazine or newspaper or almost any current book or play, and mark especially the amazing difference between public speeches and private thoughts. There are the romantics of politics, and the self-concealment of debate, and the duty to the crowd, and the duty to the coterie, and the duty to the time of day, and the

PREFACE

constraint of success, and the fear of being misunderstood, and the care of the universe, and the hundred other anxieties that make up our chief imaginary obligation to seem something different from what we are—something wiser or more sententious or more brilliant or more reasonable and educational, something far less human and infinitely less absurd. We cannot even see a man with a book without worrying over the effect it may have on him, and we would turn every critic into a sort of literary legislator. We try to compel good taste and the harmless word “culture” has already acquired a grim and horrid sound. On the lightest of matters we lay the heaviest of hands. At every point our indefatigable instructors would substitute a formula for a vital process. Our fancied obligations to these little formulas are for the most part the subject of this book, which is made up of certain newspaper and magazine articles, edited and rearranged. The topics discussed are transitory, but they are bound to recur, and the writings quoted are evanescent but they are of a kind that

PREFACE

often return. I have written about them because I enjoyed their absurdity, but incidentally they may show why so many of us grow old rigidly or develop an alarming spiritual pomposity in our middle age.



CONTENTS

I

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

| | | |
|-----|------------------------------|----|
| I | BOOKS WE HAVEN'T READ | 1 |
| II | A PROBLEM OF CULTURE | 7 |
| III | LITERARY BURROWING | 13 |
| IV | THE DIFFIDENCE OF PRINT | 17 |
| V | THE WRITER WHO DOES NOT CARE | 25 |
| VI | THE LITERARY TEMPERAMENT | 33 |

II

THE CROWDED FORUM

| | | |
|------|---------------------------------------|----|
| I | THE NATIONAL ANGLE | 40 |
| II | "AMERICANISM" | 49 |
| III | CONCERNING HEROES | 54 |
| IV | A "REMARKABLE" MAN | 60 |
| V | OLD AND NEW DEBATEERS | 64 |
| VI | ASPERITIES OF PEACEMAKING | 70 |
| VII | MEASURING AN AMERICAN REPUTA- TION | 77 |
| VIII | DEMOCRATIC GENTILITY | 83 |

III

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

| | | |
|----|------------------|----|
| I | SETTING THE PACE | 88 |
| II | THE WALK UPTOWN | 95 |

CONTENTS

| | | |
|-----|---------------------------|-----|
| III | THE READING PUBLIC | 99 |
| IV | REFORMERS AND BROOMSTICKS | 109 |

IV

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

| | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| I | ON SEEING TEN BAD PLAYS | 118 |
| II | THE SPAN OF THE STAGE | 128 |
| III | ON CERTAIN "PROBLEM" PLAYS | 134 |
| IV | CONVENTIONAL PLAYS | 145 |
| V | PRIVATE TASTES AND PRINTED CRITI- CISM | 151 |

V

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

| | | |
|-----|------------------------------|-----|
| I | BACCALAUREATE SERMONS | 167 |
| II | THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FRESHMEN | 172 |
| III | THE CO-EDUCATION SCARE | 178 |
| IV | THE TRAINED WOMAN | 182 |
| V | EDUCATIONAL EMOTIONS | 189 |
| VI | INNER CIRCLES | 194 |

VI

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

| | | |
|-----|------------------------|-----|
| I | THE DRIER CRITICISM | 200 |
| II | PAINSTAKING ILLITERACY | 205 |
| III | THE HAND OF PROVIDENCE | 210 |
| IV | NOTHING NEW | 216 |
| V | LITERARY ANALYSIS | 221 |
| VI | OUTDOOR PEDANTRY | 226 |
| VII | A POPULARIZER | 234 |

CONTENTS

VII

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

| | | |
|-----|-----------------------|-----|
| I | THE SUMMER EXPERIMENT | 239 |
| II | THE PEOPLE NEXT DOOR | 244 |
| III | THE CHEERFUL GIVER | 249 |
| IV | THE SERIOUS WOMAN | 254 |
| V | MUSIC AT MEALS | 260 |

VIII

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

| | | |
|------|--------------------------------|-----|
| I | LITERARY REPUTATIONS | 265 |
| II | THE PRAISE OF MINOR AUTHORS | 271 |
| III | THE PHRASEMAKER | 279 |
| IV | THE PURSUIT OF HUMOR | 284 |
| V | THE TEMPTATION OF AUTHORS | 289 |
| VI | THE JOURNALIST AND HIS BETTERS | 295 |
| VII | RUNNING AN ORACLE | 301 |
| VIII | FOR WOMAN AND THE HOME | 306 |
| IX | ON BEHALF OF OBSCURE VERSE | 315 |
| X | IN DARKEST JAMES | 321 |



PART I

ON LITERARY COMPUL- SION

I

BOOKS WE HAVEN'T READ

A WRITER on French literature contrasts the cultivated Frenchman's definite knowledge of his own classics with the miscellaneous reading of the Anglo-Saxon of the same class. In France there are certain things that people with a taste for reading are supposed to know, and do know. With us there is no safety in this assumption. The greater variety of our literature and the flexibility of our standards account in his opinion for the difference. It is a comfortable way of putting the thing, and we need the suggestion, for we are always setting up standards in this

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

matter and tormenting ourselves and others for non-conformity. The truth is there are nine and sixty ways of reading our tribal lays as well as of making them. There is no path in reading which we can safely advise another grown-up Anglo-Saxon person to follow, and there is no single book for not reading which he can deservedly be brought to shame. Yet, for certain neglects of this sort we actually persecute. It is a mild form of persecution, but it causes needless suffering and, what is worse, it begets lies.

Pride of reading is a terrible thing. There are certain literary sets in which the book is an instrument of tyranny. If you have not read it you are made to feel unspeakably abject, for the book you have not read is always the one book in the world that you should have read. It is the sole test of literary insight, good taste and mental worth. To confess that you have not read it is to expose yourself as an illiterate person. It is like admitting that you have never eaten with a fork. Now, when this social

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

pressure is brought to bear upon a man, what happens? This depends on his moral character. If there is a flaw in it anywhere, it breaks down. Weak, sensitive persons will invariably stammer out a lie. The temptation to escape the ignominy is irresistible. The have-reads are hard, insolent and cruelly triumphant. The haven't-reads feel that they must either tell lies or slink away. Then there are all sorts of miserable compromises. Without actually saying that he has read one of the obligatory books, a weak character will act as if he had. He ventures a few of those vague, universal comments which he knows are bound to be true of anything, anywhere. But it is a wretched piece of business, and most harrowing to the nerves. The awful fidgetiness of a poor baited unread man, when he thinks he is being cornered, is pitiful to see. Next comes the stage of involuntary deceit. By talking about books as if he had read them he comes to think that he has. He uses third-hand quotations as if they were his own. At this point humbug enters the heart;

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

the mind, as you might say, becomes encrusted with its own pretence. Finally, there is literary second childishness, oblivion and death. Some choose the more virtuous course by reading books just to say they have read them, thereby saving their souls, perhaps, but certainly swamping their intellects.

All this in a field where you can do and say exactly what you please, where there is even a premium on a whim. Where is the sanction for these grim obligations? How big a bibliography goes to make a man of culture? What course of summer reading would have been equally suitable for Carlyle and Charles Lamb? A list of our unread books torments some of us like a list of murders. Yet it is not they but the books we have read that will accuse us. Just here we find a consolation. Frankly confessed ignorance of a book never bores any one and does no harm. Ignorance of books is not infectious, but sham knowledge of them is. The real offence is reading in such a way that it leaves you the worse for it. One would rather hear some men talk about

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

the vegetables they had eaten than the books they had read. They put more real feeling into it. A small vitality may be smothered by much reading, and the book-talk of these people is the author's deadliest foe. The books we have not read may be another way of saying the authors we have not injured. The reader is so often unworthy of the book.

We need all the comfort we can get. Small literary ambitions trip up many of us every day. Many a man lives beyond his literary income from an absurd kind of book pride. Why should we not own up like Darwin—change the subject to earthworms if they interest us more? There was more “literary merit” in what he said of earthworms than in what most of us say about belles-lettres. It is not the topic that gives the literary quality. And we never can finish our course of reading. We shall all be tucked away in our graves with a long list of good things still unread. But if we have not lied about these or humbugged ourselves about the others or staled any good man's memory by

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

feeble-minded repetitions, we may be saved. Otherwise we shall be snubbed by every author across the Styx. And if the only thing a multitude of books have done for a man is to enable him to mention them and quote them and appear to be in the "literary swim," he is no fit person for the company of honest authors. He does not belong in Arcadia at all, but behind the counter in a retail book-shop, where there is a good business reason for plaguing other people about the books they haven't read. By these and kindred reflections we may console ourselves in part for our deficiencies and ward off the temptation of the sham.

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

II

A PROBLEM OF "CULTURE"

EVERY little while there appears an article on current American literature that takes all the hope and self-confidence out of you—that is, if you had any idea of keeping up with the times. There are so many authors that the writer knows and you do not. Sometimes you never heard their names at all. Sometimes you have heard their names and nothing more. Then comes this terribly well-informed person implying in everything he says that greatness in a dozen different fields has wholly escaped your notice. Poets piping the sweetest kind of things at your very doors, and you never hear them. Stupendous "local color" work going on at every railway junction, and you heed it not. I have been reading an article of this kind in one of our most serious magazines. It deals with the progress of literature in the southern states, and though the writer says he leaves out many names of equal importance with those mentioned, he goes far

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

enough to convince you that you must always remain illiterate. There is no chance of catching up now.

Here, for example, is a mere fraction of the literature that is waiting for you in the several states. In Kentucky there is a school of lyric poetry, "quite unique, with Mr. Lane, Mr. Cox, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Perkins as its chief lyrists." Do you know them all? Why not? "In Tennessee Mr. Withers and Mr. B. F. Boole are writing creditable verse." To skip Withers and Boole is to cut out the very heart of culture. Then there is Mr. Bowles of Arkansas, who is doing wonders for that state. Bowles of Arkansas has "a polish that suggests some subtle connection between cypress groves and the classics." Professor Slope is doing even more for North Carolina, where he is not only "publishing creditable poetry," but spreading fiction. And "passing softly over South Carolina (very softly, for fear of waking up J. Gordon Coogler of Columbia) we find Georgia illuminated by the talent of Mr. Hodges and Mr. Norris." Some of them

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

you will know, of course. It is not likely, for instance, that Professor Slope's work in North Carolina has been unnoticed, or that you are wholly ignorant of what Miss Beatrice Simmons is doing in Alabama. But did you know that Texas had its Bagby?

If the list were exhaustive one would not feel so much abashed at his ignorance of a part of it, but these are only a few of the very greatest names, and with these the writer feels it safe to assume that every educated person is familiar. He has a hundred others in reserve. A short time before this article was printed, a professor of literature had counted up contemporary American novelists, including only those whose work had real significance and was sure to live forever. There were sixty-six of them. In no other class of men do you find such indomitable energy as in these writers on American literature. It is a life of heroic sacrifice and incessant toil, for no man could possibly be so thorough in this field unless he confined himself strictly to it and labored day and night. With sixty-six American novelists

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

to be conscientiously studied and appraised, he cannot fritter away his time with the classics, and if he turns his attention for one instant to what is going on abroad he is bound to skip some one in Nebraska or Oregon. For say what you will, a man's reading power is limited, and thoroughness nowadays is to be had only by concentration. I do not deny that a man may read occasionally in Shelley or Heine or Browning and at the same time keep his eye on Bowles of Arkansas and Slope of North Carolina. But I do argue that it is a dangerous business to divide his time in this way if he aims at thoroughness. For it is not as if there were merely Slopes and Bowleses. There are Lanes, Booles, Witherses and Bagbys by the dozen, and the mind that shall grasp all these and retain them permanently must not be distracted.

In regard to "creditable verse" I go even further. It is safer in this field to specialize by states. No one should try and keep track of the "creditable verse" in the whole country. Unless he has a very remarkable mind he will surely be

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

superficial and very likely unjust. There are no statistics of "creditable verse," but from common observation I know there is not a state in the Union that does not raise enough of it to take all one man's time measuring it off and ticketing it. And any one who sets himself the task of reading all of it has no right to expect any time to spare for verse that is more than creditable. That is the puzzling thing about these articles on contemporary writers. They present problems of specialization in their most baffling form. Those robust and even-tempered people seem not to be aware of them. Signs of increasing literary activity fill them with the most amazing cheerfulness. There is a poet out in Arizona now, they will say, and he is turning out reasonably good verse quite rapidly. They speak of him as if he were a new water-works. To our weaker or more indolent minds that discovery would be an embarrassment. It is tantalizing to hear of another fairly good poet. What is to be done with him? There are very few of us who have finished with the other kind of poets.

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

You must cut somewhere, for life is short. In the long run the choice will narrow down to this alternative: Either you will seek culture by a course of reading under the direction of these writers and give up your life to it; or you will grow so callous that the setting up of a new and serviceable poet in a western town will excite you no more than the opening of a new cigar shop.

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

III

LITERARY BURROWING

THE *Iliad* is a great symbolical poem, according to a certain critic, because Homer makes a group of old men, on seeing Helen pass by, remark: "After all, she was worth it," or words to that effect. This, according to our commentator, proves that the *Iliad* contains a great moral idea; in other words, is symbolical. Now, Homer was the most utterly unsymbolical person (if he was a person) that ever enjoyed good health. He never had anything of that kind the matter with him, and his poems are as free from it as they are from germs. The way our sophisticated modern critic will read complex innuendoes into what is elemental is enough to wear one's patience to the bone. Must poor old Homer father a lot of esoteric things? Is the *Iliad* to have four or five layers of meaning, one below the other, like a pile of sandwiches? This digging up of unsuspected meanings goes too far. It spoils a poem to be all the time spading

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

it or boring through its imagery with a steam drill. These critics spend too much of their time underground, and they look pale and unwholesome when they come up. And it often happens that what they bring up is something they have dropped themselves. There are commentators who have been digging all their lives and come up with their own pocket handkerchief. They expect you to be glad about it. They think a poet, like a dog, no sooner happens on a good thing than he wants to bury it.

A few years ago an inmate of one of our state asylums was taken out for a walk in a pleasant park. As soon as his keeper's back was turned he jumped down a manhole and ran along a sewer main. When dug up at great expense he complained of the interference, saying he was "keeping store" down there. So of a symbolist when you let him into a poem. One would think Homer might have escaped this. The meaning of the *Iliad* is so accessible it seems foolish to try and enter it through a gopher hole. But if we must, we must. Helen is divine beauty;

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

Menelaus is the soul; Paris the heart of humanity; Nestor the onlooking, judging thought; Thersites the ego, and Achilles the personification of world energy. And whenever one of them does anything it means six or eight other things, and they never can take a step without leaving a footnote. Then it will amount to something to say you understand Homer. It will rank you among the seven deepest thinkers in the world, and even in regard to the other six you may reasonably entertain suspicions.

That is really the ambitious motive at the root of this kind of criticism. Below every great poem there is a little subterranean aristocracy where rank is measured by its distance from the surface. Each is aiming at the point furthest down. A few years ago a Shakespearian critic showed that when Falstaff was made to babble of green fields he was really quoting from one of the psalms. This proved that he had received a religious education, and was probably a choir boy in his youth. The man who hit upon this illuminating thought was for weeks a marvel among

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

critics. Since then they have no doubt found Falstaff to be nine different kinds of an allegory ; so rapidly does the work advance. Why need every honest poet be suspected of leading a quadruple life? Sometimes the second or third meaning is less interesting than the first, and the only really difficult thing about a poem is the critic's explanation of it. But active minds must find employment, and if you cannot burrow how can you be deep? And if you are not deep you are that wretched, vulgar thing, a casual reader, and will be snubbed to the end of your days by these haughty troglodytes. So when one of them comes along, never let him see you feeding on the surface of a poem. Dive to the bottom like a loon. You can bring up queer things from below as well as he. Swear you got them from the deepest part. Then he will feel degraded and superficial and blush awkwardly like a casual reader.

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

IV

THE DIFFIDENCE OF PRINT

THE moralists who are forever discussing the behaviour of newspapers pay no attention to the reader's main complaint. You might think from the criticism of newspapers that it was all a matter of tall headlines, slander and sensation. Start a reform movement, and that is the sort of thing it aims at. But why not own up? Our main grudge is against the most respectable. What if the people you met talked like a newspaper—never made an admission or saw but one side, never retracted except on compulsion or paused in the praise of themselves? Suppose their cause is a good one, do you like them for licking its boots? Consider that awful thing they call "the policy." There is nothing more amazing to the reader than the way a mind can be wrapped in a "policy." Many a decorous newspaper is edited by a moral papoose. In private life "the policy" would make you talk in epitaphs of last year's opinions, hook your fancy to a foregone conclu-

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

sion, turn your mind into a bare card catalogue of the things you used to think. But being a man and not a newspaper, you can blame a workingman to-day and a capitalist to-morrow. Rules are good, but an exception is no sacrilege, and there is no fact on earth that a grown man need hide from and no cause in Heaven that is worth his cheating for.

So it might be with newspapers, but they seem by nature secretive. Are you for Our President? Behold, we are at his feet. Are you against him, kind reader? Here, then, are ten more Philippine atrocities of which nine rest on no evidence, but we count them in for the good of the cause. Do the facts seem against us this morning? Then here goes for "Rug-weaving in Armenia," or, "Does a College Education Pay?" We trust it will not be suspected that we are dodging the point. Here is the forlorn little editor, so afraid of things as they are that he is doomed for months to total irrelevancy; and there is the praiser of corporations who dares not stop; and this is Mr. Pecksniff's paper with

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

the luxuriant moral and the little meannesses that destroy the vines. The types are familiar in every large city. Where are the people who like them? Yet they are clean and respectable, and, like most of our pet aversions, are safely within the law. Criticism in private takes these lines. Public criticism—the kind that comes from the pulpit or is engrossed in resolutions—aims only at what is gross and palpable. It blames the license of the press, when our main grievance is its strange constraints and silences. In spite of the great improvement in the news columns, the comment that gives personal character has in the past fifteen years grown so feeble that many talk of giving it up altogether and leaving us alone with the reporters.

It is a loss to American letters. No matter how well news is gathered or how accurately told, the time will never come when we are content with bare narration. Those frank and inspiriting little newspaper essays were about the best things Americans ever did with their pen, but what with the death of some men and the deliquescence of

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

others, they are now on the level with our books. It is not a matter of premises or principles or morals in the conventional degree. We are friendly and inquisitive little animals, and the man is the main thing, after all, and there is never a moment when we would not rather meet a real one than look at a panorama of world politics or see a gas-tank explode. The newest thing in the world is a new way of looking at an old one, and the greatest thing that ever happened is what somebody happened to think. People read newspapers more for company than for guidance; and their criticism is nine-tenths epicurean. Virtue is safe, but the mind feels lonesome in most things that we read. A reformer never seems to miss anything not mentioned in a moral code, but it is not so with the rest of us.

Here we read: "Another saddening proof of the havoc the war spirit has wrought among us is afforded by the shocking scandals in the Jonesville post-office. 'War is hell,' says Burke. It was indeed to be expected that the

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

poison would spread from the heart to the members. The government that sanctions a selfish and unholy war cannot avoid the logical consequences, and from rapine and torture in the Philippines it is an easy step to knavery at home. 'Corrupt the morality at the centre,' said Milton, 'and the devil will ramp on the perimeter.' The return of the proconsul laden with booty affords his fellow-citizen no safer example than he did in the days of Tacitus, and the warning that Sallust sounded to the venal city soon to perish (*mature perituram*) might well have been meant for us." Academic and in a sense conscientious, but where is the man on the premises? Or again, let the poor old Job of a public hearken unto the son of Barachel the Buzite: "Once more with characteristic vigor and common sense President Roosevelt has utterly confounded the assailants of the Administration and vindicated the honor of the nation. Not a shred remains of the charges against the army or the government. No one can now doubt that the headquarters of the Philippine revolt were in Boston, and fresh

ON LITERARY COMPELSION

reports from Manila daily confirm the belief that but for treachery in this country the insurrection would not have lasted a day. President Roosevelt is not the man to shirk responsibility. As he said in his address to the Yale students, 'What this country needs is men that can bite.' Wise, statesmanlike and courageous, he has the people with him. 'Breathe hard,' said he at the Seattle Young Ladies' Seminary, waving a Rough Rider flag, 'play hard, rest hard, work hard; up and at it, no matter what it is.' Nothing could better express his own spirit and that of the American people." This is the way men divide in print, but there is nothing like it in nature. Nobody's private opinions ever take this form. It is the monochrome of party and the stage necessity of debate, the twang of the pen and the hypocrisy of the ink-bottle which make the difference between men and editors. It is not an affair of the heart.

Men are never so prim and starchy, so deeply dyed and terribly committed in real life. Many an honest fellow-being, full of earnest whims and

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

pleasing foibles, variegated, complex, alive and charming, goes down into print as into a sarcophagus, and when you mourn his loss thinks you are trifling with the sound moral sentiment engraved on the tomb. Perhaps it comes from hearing so much about bringing things "to the bar of public opinion" and all that. Perhaps it is due to an embarrassed sense of the presence of Tom, Dick and Harry. Lowell's theory of it was that the soul had done something in a pre-existent state it was now ashamed of. But the basis of criticism is negative—not the sins committed but the pleasures withheld—and the pleasure of being talked to as an equal is the main thing the readers miss. Suppose somebody does misunderstand, or a few fat gentlemen fall by the wayside or a spinster or two is frightened away, is the thing so grave? Must one feel as pompous as Cicero? Will his country come to him in a dream and say, "Marcus Tullius, what *are* you doing?" Let the great mind go crashing forth; the casualties will be surprisingly small. That is the proper advice

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

to give to any American writer. The question before the man is what to do in his neutral intervals, in the holidays of his virtues and the pauses of his sin, for there are days and days when the moral character needs nothing done to it and the politics are all in place, when life may be merely lived and the country merely looked at,—a time of secular cravings, a permissibly mundane time, the days of the devil's siesta, the reformer's Saturday nights. But an editor seldom knows such intervals, for human nature is a different thing from print. Pen in hand, he believes we do all our thinking in majorities, enjoy by popular consent, make friends on principle,—doubts if there is even the larva of an imagination or a latent power of pleasant dreams, or a tender side toward any mental temptation in this exceedingly business-like land.

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

V

THE WRITER WHO DOES NOT CARE

THERE is no sign in Kipling's writings that he has ever learned anything from his critics or made any concessions to his public's demands. Take it or leave it, has been his attitude from the first. In his own good time, after people had despised of him, he wrote *Kim*. We then told him distinctly that was the kind of thing we wanted of him, and asked him to do it again; whereupon he undertook the conduct of the British Government through the agency of bad verse. *The Islanders* may be true and statesmanlike, and rifle clubs may be founded on the strength of it, and cricketers may hang their heads for shame. Some say poetry is as poetry does; but not if it save the British Empire shall we ever admit the goodness of this poem or that it is a poem at all. It will be classed in the long run with Kipling's rhymed journalism, effective but transitory, a matter of a few fiery phrases, much overstraining and many flat lines. As mere

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

literary pleasure-lovers, his readers have a right to complain. Bother his prophecies and devil take his reforms and all those ballads with a purpose, and letters on South Africa, and allegories on steam engines, and monodies on quartermaster's supplies. That is the way they feel about it, blaming not so much the subjects as Kipling's way with them. Critics who praise Kipling's faculty of throwing himself into a subject forget that one unfortunate result has been his total disappearance in it. He paints himself in with his local color. It has happened again and again. A man among men, but also a piston-rod among piston-rods. Other writers have at one time or another paid some attention to criticism. There was George Meredith, for instance, whom no one would accuse of pliancy. He was swerved entirely from his early course by adverse criticism. And Thomas Hardy, the only other living novelist of Kipling's rank, was influenced by it to his own and our advantage. But from Kipling, as from a Tammany water main, we must take

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

things as they come, knowing that protests are in vain.

He will not repent, or conform, or edit himself, or study how to please. But there is about him a sort of surly sincerity even at his worst. He at least is interested if you are not. He is pleased with each sudden new intimacy and exasperatingly glib in its jargon and would as lief lose readers as not. Bridge-building or whatever it may be—down he goes in it with a horrid splash of terminology and remains defiantly uninteresting for months at a time. It is not as if he tried to please and failed. It is his mood, not yours. He is merely muttering to himself the technicalities of his hobby, and criticism cannot shake it out of him. In the intervals of something like genius he is merely a pig-headed man. But the course has some advantages. He never does what is expected of him, but he sometimes does more. Whatever his sins are, they are not sins of subservience, and meanwhile he lives his own life. Not that his unliterary activities have any value in themselves. Beyond stirring up

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

rows and coining some quotable phrases, what has he done for politics these last few years? But looked at as a form of diversion, politics have done something for him.

At all events, he has escaped some of the fatal consequences of a literary success. Success is usually the result of a sharpened sense of what is wanted. As a general rule, the successful writer, especially the successful American writer, is a man who is disciplined by demand. The vagaries of self-expression may do for a few privileged characters, but the steady, substantial incomes are for those who do what is expected of them. Taking it altogether, it is the line of least resistance, the happy level and the golden average, and the best rule for the greatest number, and the only safe course *à priori* if you have a family to support. Not that they say one thing when they particularly want to say another. There is no deliberate heterophemy about it. But people who get on in the world have developed a sort of market nerve and can feel it throbbing in the back of the brain. Of many thoughts it auto-

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

matically thrusts forward the one that is most presentable, and by an instinctive arithmetic counts votes on every sentence before it is written down. This is the general law of successful literary composition, though not so stated in the books. The uniformity of American fiction, about which so many lose their temper, merely shows that our writers have never felt like risking much for self-expression, and there is no good reason why they should. *Sic vos non vobis* is the motto of all efficient public entertainers. If they had any big peculiar ideas, they would probably let us have a peep at them. Nothing very great is being hidden, we believe. Yet every little while a critic attacks them on the ground that they ought to do better, and that the best selling books are not literature. Aim higher and sell less, he says. It is the theory of concealed genius. Kipling's contemptuous non-conformity would carry most men straight to the poor-house. Nor does it follow that posterity will like any better the things that the present rejects. The ferocious onslaughts on

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

recent American novels are both illogical and unfair.

Still, people have their harmless little peculiarities, and it has often been noted by observers that American writers of fiction are not nearly so much alike as their books. Natural diversities linger though tucked out of sight by the pen. But it has happened often that once in the public favor they are never quite the same men again. Success, like a flat-iron, smoothes out the little irregularities that might just as well have been left in, and there are whimsicalities about the people that we are apt to miss in their books. Caution and self-repression to the extent of holding back certain matters that might with perfect safety be let go certainly do seem a little over-developed in our writers. What with wondering whether the editor will like it, and whether the public will take to it, and whether the critics will see through it, there is little chance for merely personal preferences of their own. And by the time the habit of pleasing everybody is formed, the soul has caught a color that will

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

not come out in the wash. Our current literature is a literature of suppressed inclinations, sometimes to our loss. The saddest thing about our young authors is the exchange of possibilities for dead certainties after they have struck their pace. With Kipling, politics serve the purpose of a rotation of crops. But here, if a writer is silent after his third romantic novel, we always know he is working like a beaver on his fourth. Something to do during the uninspired intervals is the great need of the calling. Even Shakespeare's nature felt the want of it—"subdued to what it works in," as he says. Kipling goes in for prophecy and empire-building as a horse goes to pasture, and comes back greatly refreshed. If it had not been for the intervening years of foolishness he might never have given us *Kim*. That is a cheering thought that ought to come to any one who reads *The Islanders* and wonders why such things need be.

Years ago he gave fair warning he would not work with an eye to his public, and he never has. Not caring at all how we liked it, he has blundered

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

into many things—sometimes a tinker, sometimes a counsellor of nations, always certain beyond human certainty, and almost always wrong. But rested by his many irrelevances and exhilarated years of impudence, he comes back to his work finally, like Kim from his illicit wanderings, and does it better than before.

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

VI

THE LITERARY TEMPERAMENT

THE young hero of Mr. Howell's *Letters Home* is so literary that he can dine gloriously at a fifty-cent table d'hôte, where on Fridays he mistakes clam chowder for *bouillabaisse* and feels like Thackeray when he is eating it. Every one he meets is a "type" and every emotion is "material." When consumed by passion he is not too preoccupied to note how that passion would look in print, and when attacked by the influenza he turns his delirium into "copy" that no magazine would refuse. He is not especially gifted. He has the temperament without the gifts. A genius writes in the overflow of life and seems to forget he is writing, but our hero could never do that. With him the phrase must always come first; his mind is book-bitten and he is doomed to edit his life in advance. Hence he never will altogether live. People of the literary temperament seldom do quite live. They are impeded by a too persistent pen-consciousness which is the

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

spiritual form of writer's cramp, and while others may merely feel, they must be making phrases as well as feeling. So by dividing the mind they lower the pulse, and they are always a little below their vital capacity. If it is a love affair, a part of the creature is taking notes and down goes his temperature; if it is an agony he must see to it that it bring forth fruit meet for publication. "I was as miserable," says this Wallace Ardith in *Letters Home*, "as a guilty wretch can be and be conscious of his innocence, but my confounded mind kept taking notes of the situation and in a hideous way rejoicing in it as material." Mr. Howells meant him for a young man, but he might be as old as Mr. Howells himself. He comes from a town in Iowa, but he might as well have been born in Thrums. The essential thing is his ingrained literosity.

We should have liked to see him hanged in the end like Sentimental Tommy, but Mr. Howells seemed rather fond of him. He showed the clemency of introspection. Few authors wish to hang their Sentimental Tommies after confess-

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

ing them. Mr. Barrie is the only Brutus among novelists, and you cannot read that book of his without hearing his self-love groan aloud. To the unliterary reader Tommy is merely a vain young man, who might even be a hero if the author would let him alone, but whenever he is most heroic Mr. Barrie is most incredulous. It was a grand deed, to be sure, he will say, but Tommy would never have done it if there had been no women around; and had there been no public, there would have been no Tommy at all, for he could do nothing for its own sake—not even draw a natural breath—but only for the sake of having it known that Tommy did it. Straightforward inartistic folk cannot make out what all this sarcasm is about, but the literary temperament blushes up to the roots of its hair when it reads it. The book was never adequately reviewed. It was too brutally intimate and indelicately true, too terribly authorish for any other author to deal with frankly and retain his self-esteem, and for any one not an author or an observer of authors to understand. Tommy

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

is practically thrown away on any reader who has not at least a literary temperament in the family.

The trouble with Tommy was simply that he had no private life. Every motive was forked like the devil's tail and he did nothing without reference to a bystander. The eternal bystander is the peculiar gift of the literary temperament. Stevenson's fancy would have peopled a desert isle, not that he might look at them but that they might see Stevenson. Alone under the sky the literary temperament still hopes it may be discovered, and fancies itself discovered when it has given up hope. In the fifth century A.D. Tommy would have been a pillar saint and stood on one leg and let the other rot off, not at all in the fear of the Lord, but in the sense of the crowd below and the high hope that some day there would be a Saint Thomas of Thrums. If there had been no crowd below, Tommy would have invented one.

The loss of the private life is the chief danger of the literary temperament. Even Shakespeare

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

feared it when he wrote that his nature was subdued to what it worked in like the dyer's hand. "The world is too much with us," said Wordsworth suddenly aware that the public had grown into him and that his soul had no songs without words and that the primrose on the river's brim a four-line stanza was to him and nothing more. Had it not been for that he would have had glimpses, standing on that pleasant lea, that would have made him less forlorn. But writers of this class are in no real danger. The risk is run on the lower plane, where life, like a magazine poem, is written before it is felt and thoughts are tried on like hats to see if they are becoming and the land is only local color and the sea is made of ink. That is where the Tommies are, among the best-selling heroes of the week, the impersonal ghosts of current literature, each trying to pick out a soul that the reading public would like the look of.

"Now you're looking holy again," said the exasperated Aaron when Tommy was planning some conspicuous nobility and resolving in his

ON LITERARY COMPELCTION

mind to look the part and seeing it all in type and hearing the reader's comments on it. The private life of the two Carlys must have been full of these little calamities, and it certainly was not genius that made the pair so uncomfortable. We all love the illusion of spontaneity and like to believe that the poet's eye doth actually glance from Heaven to earth instead of glancing sidewise at the onlooker. It is not pleasant to ascertain that Poe's *Raven* would not have been written if he had not happened to observe that "Nevermore" would make a musical refrain and "Lenore" rhymed with it and that he brought in the raven only because nothing but a raven would be at all likely to ejaculate "nevermore" at regular intervals, except possibly a parrot, and a parrot would not rhyme with Lenore. Poe's description of his processes set many minor poets working wrong-end-to. Nor do we like to read how Burke generously tinkered poor Crabbe's poem and Johnson lent his heavy hand and Crabbe accepted everything as more likely to beguile the public, forgetting by that

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

time that he had started out with anything of his own. But while the most gifted sometimes sink to it, the merely clever never rise above it, and they leave you wondering whether there is anything in them that the public did not put there. That is why Miss Emily Dickinson exclaimed that she liked a look of agony because she knew it was real and why Kingsley advised everybody to be only good and "let who will be clever," and why Hotspur called poetry the "forced gait of a shuffling nag" and why sometimes after a brilliant literary meeting where authors read their papers our heart goes out to the simple and spontaneous, natural and single-minded cow who never flourishes her tail for our sakes, but to remove from her actual haunches an authenticated fly. The literary emotions are so seldom authenticated in the secondary ranges of art.

PART II

THE CROWDED FORUM

I

THE NATIONAL ANGLE

PEOPLE who think we are, as a nation, no longer sensitive to criticism, should have followed the comments upon a certain little volume of essays on American traits dealing with our faults of character in an entertaining way. The author was a German who for several years had been a professor in one of our universities. It is written, the author tells us, "from a German point of view," though there was not the least need of his mentioning it, and it was not what you would call a serious contribution to political science, but was, perhaps, the better reading on that account.

THE CROWDED FORUM

Like most of these comparative race studies, it drew its material mainly from the writer's patriotic heart. He likes his own land better, and emphatically tells us why, as if anybody could not give reasons for a thing like that. It was matter for toasts, poems, flag-raisings, and *hochs* —a sheer animal preference for one's own; yet critics took it as seriously as if it were an attempt in pure philosophy. They blamed him for not having a judicial mind; though why an expatriated gentleman, terribly homesick, no doubt, should be expected to have one, it is not easy to make out. Yet they argued it out with him painfully, as if there were some logical process for rebutting his German blood. We are still very touchy, and these comparisons of foreigners do still most unaccountably flutter us, and there is invariably a little chorus of *tu quoques* and a sort of patriotic huff and a long ingenuous wrangle over things no more debatable than a taste in wives and children. No visitor can take notes on us, even now, without starting one of these queer controversies, and (self-esteem being

THE CROWDED FORUM

the most voluble of the emotions) there is no small amount of printed matter taken up with them first and last. Great masses of mankind are weighed one against one another, as in the hand of Allah, and "these to Heaven and I care not, and those to Hell and I care not;" and the nativity of the umpire determines which is which. German ideals, says the Professor, without the least tremor of indecision, are higher than American ideals; to which an American writer retorts excitedly, "But you must admit in common fairness that American ideals are broader at the base." No one knows what they mean exactly, or how they found it out. But we all do know where their hearts are—honest folk, perched each on his national angle and crowing with all his might. Not to say a word against the national angle. *Præter omnes angulus ridet*—or ought to, whosoever it is. But why this solemn show of reasons for things that were bred in the bone?

It is a most beatific bias, and a man ought to be proud of it; and for my part, were I ever to embark in such a controversy, I should go in

THE CROWDED FORUM

singing the battle-cry of freedom, knowing perfectly well I could never be quite fair-minded toward other people's fatherlands, no matter how hard I tried. Nor would I disguise the fisticuffs of self-vindication under any show of comparative philosophy; and in reply to the man who sized up our country in a sentence, I should dispose of Germany in four scorching words—that is, if I did anything about it at all, which, on second thoughts, is doubtful. There may be philosophers who fish all their patriotism out of comparative statistics; but it is not the usual way, and most of our foreign observers bring their conclusions with them as part of their racial physique. So it was with the Professor, whose mind sweeps all history and forms of government and spans two continents in a flash. His book is a series of lover's comparisons, and we are the other girls. Very telling comparisons, some of them. "Whenever a genius is needed, democracy appoints a committee," says he. *Ach Gott!* the land where geniuses are as common as committees. *Liebt' Heimat land; liebt' Heimat land!*

THE CROWDED FORUM

Were the writings on America stripped of all national prejudices and personal whims, they would be about as lively as a school atlas; and for all our anger at Dickens fifty years ago, we know if he had written fairly we should not have read him at all. A man cannot always be in a battle mood about his country. There is some fun to be had at her expense. The heights of oratorical tradition are not for every-day use, though we can climb up to them after dinner when there is a big enough crowd. They are chiefly for the people who have some vested interest in bombast, and it often happens that the grandest public tributes are saluted with private grins. Foreigners never make allowance for the great, fatuous platform-change that comes over certain of our people whenever they rise to speak. "Build, build," said a Western Senator; build and expand and plant the flag on all the archipelagoes and seize all the canals in this hemisphere and turn the Pacific Ocean into an American lake. "This," he concluded, "is not enthusiasm; it is geography." Being used to the

THE CROWDED FORUM

thing, we know, of course, it was neither, but the mere chest notes of a Senator, a harmless, hyperbolical Senator, in a mood of the utmost publicity, in a pause of his private faculties, trying his best to please. "We must be cracked up, sir," said Mr. Hannibal Chollop, "this country must be cracked up," and Senators still live in the Chollop tradition. Nor is Mr. Chollop the only type in *Martin Chuzzlewit* that recent speeches recall. Neither General Choke nor the Hon. Lafayette Kettle could have outdone that speech in Congress, on the occasion of Prince Henry's visit, with its reference to the German prince as "that little Dutchman," and to the "truckle-ency" of foreign courts. It was the very language of Dickens's burlesque Americans. Foreigners judge us by it —all of us. "We have heard," says our latest observer, "through the whole scale, from the editorials of the yellow press to the orations of leading Senators, the voice of that aggressive temper which waits for an opportunity to show American superiority to the world by battles and

THE CROWDED FORUM

not by arbitration." He notes among our characteristics "a bumptious oratory, a flippant superficiality of style, a lack of æsthetic refinement . . . a constant exploitation on the part of immature young men with loud newspaper voices," and so forth. And he bears down on it all with argument, page after page of it, to prove that Columbia is not really the gem of the ocean and the only land of the free. It is like rebuking a brass band. That is the way with foreigners. They are forever trying to knock the wind out of the national superlative—a thing that the gods could not do.

Thence come these absurd discussions with a class of people that the rest of us know better than ever to reason with. Private thinking seldom takes this line. One's personal friends neither talk like editorials nor feel like Senators, and one may travel all day long without meeting the "typical" American who figures in the books. Foreigners do not realize that the great liturgy of buncombe stops at the private door, and that even its high priests are none too serious about it

THE CROWDED FORUM

after the reporters go. We see the flag too often to be stirred by every flap of it, and we meet too many fellow-citizens to be sentimental about them all, and the Pilgrim Fathers are rarely mentioned, and the guns of Manila never boom in private conversation, and nobody congratulates you on freedom of worship, trial by jury, or the mounting exports of steel, and you go to sleep without dreaming of island empires, and you wake up without disparaging Germany. These awful burdens are borne only by public characters aiming at the lowest wit of the greatest number, as practical statesmen will, and undershooting it often, we are bound to say. Publicity exacts of them a show of more emotion than they ever privately feel. They must keep their love of country at honeymoon heat, poor things! And never was a land so complimented down to the last detail. Hosanna to the American potato! it is forging ahead each year. Yet it is wasteful to write a serious book against it, for the people who would be likely to read it do not need the reproof. And it is a great mistake to

THE CROWDED FORUM

rouse those tedious patriots who let drive at the writer's country in revenge. And, finally, how do the pundits in race traits manage to gather so quickly the souls of all the peoples in the hollow of their hands, and why is it that the conclusions of such detached philosophers invariably follow the flag? It is a whimsical sort of writing, the more whimsical the better, and ought never to be measured by its approach to absolute truth.

THE CROWDED FORUM

II

“AMERICANISM”

AFTER all, the crowd certainly likes it—the kind of speech that a Senator once made at a public dinner, which I happen to recall, and if a man wants quick returns from bursts of eloquence this is the kind of burst he should carry in his manuscript notes. The five hundred diners received it “with great enthusiasm,” and he could scarce go on for the “cheers and hand-clapping.” With any crowd it would have been the same. The touch of nature? Not exactly. Only the touch of crowd nature, which rubs off when you are alone. In the meanwhile what has the man been saying? Why, that something or other is epoch making; that the situation is intense; that the spirit of Puritanism bids us reach forth, expand, blow up, roar, and, above all, brag that we are God’s only this and a heaven-born that till the word Americanism sets the whole world grinning. “The Pacific is the American Ocean. The Gulf is an American lake.

THE CROWDED FORUM

.... Our flag floats over the Antilles. And when the Stars and Stripes is hauled down in Cuba, let it hang awhile at half-mast in mourning for the people of Cuba abandoned and the duty of the United States deserted. These are epochal facts. The future of the world is in our hands." This is no one man's view. It is crowd language. It is the echo of that lower harmony, that vulgar confluence of egotisms by which we tell the crowd whether it is washed or unwashed, at a New England dinner or at an Australian korroboree. Why call it American? Huxley describes the natives of one of the islands visited by the Rattlesnake as trying to impress the strangers by galloping along the shore, "prancing just as boys do when playing horse." It is not peculiar to American senators.

"The Puritan," said the Senator, "had the logic of geography, and we his children must have it, too. All Atlantic and Pacific canals and the future of Central America so far as affected thereby are American questions—we cannot permit a concert of powers in solving them."

THE CROWDED FORUM

But since the greater includes the less, why talk of the future of Central America? It was the future of the world just now. Are we not going to have the whole thing then—we, the God's onlys and the heaven-sent, and the *Je suis moi's* and the *Egomet ipse's*? Only a hemisphere after all? Take care or some other Senator will outflap you. There may be a bigger dinner and a bigger inspiration and a lower barrier of common sense, and some one who will know how to take advantage of the collective mental slump. There is always that danger in these lower appeals. Talk of islands and isthmuses, and the next man may bid continents. Begin with planetary systems, not canals. And though we despise it in private, you are quite apt to find that a herd of us will first endure, then pity, then hooray.

“There has come a new turn in the world drama,” says another orator. “We have taken the centre of the stage. . . . We see the faces of the nations half sneering, half fearing. . . . The world has grown intensely conscious of America.” This is no new turn. There has never been a

THE CROWDED FORUM

moment when a world was not watching us, when a continent or two was not amazed by us or a hemisphere provoked, when an orator was not saying just what Europe thought of us, how Asia wondered and Africa winked; and that man is no true patriot who implies that even for an instant we were not the centre of the stage. Nor is it a mere matter of nations. It is a cosmic affair, with gossip going on in the Zodiac and a rumpus in the Milky Way, Mars sneering, and Saturn thunderstruck and an uneasy smile on the face of the firmament that ill conceals its fear. We hate a cautious patriot who talks like a plum when he feels like a pumpkin. It is a generous emotion, and why not let it go? In this mood a world is not enough for us; we bump our heads against the sky.

But the chief danger is the collapse of the emotions when the word American has ceased thrilling through the orator's nose. How in the world can we keep it up? It is not a solitaire game. None of us can go on like that all by himself under the stars. The heavens are too

THE CROWDED FORUM

sarcastic. We are soon feeling uncomfortable and hoping nobody heard. Somebody always does hear. That is the worst of it. Dickens heard, and he gave us *Martin Chuzzlewit*. A few jeer at it as your true Americanism. A few, who are deadly serious, prophesy the end of all things, inhaling odors from their moral vinai-grette. The rest of us understand the oratorical traditions and know that patriotism is not destroyed by burlesque.

THE CROWDED FORUM

III

CONCERNING HEROES

IT was interesting to see how the heroes of the South African war weathered the flattery that fell upon them. It was a rather hard test of character. Lord Roberts came through it with all his wits about him and with all his moral qualities in trim working order. So, probably, did some others; but, reasoning from precedents, it would be surprising if the majority of those heroes were not somewhat damaged. The odds were against them. By the time the public has regained its senses the hero has lost his. It is the usual way the story ends, and there is no means of insuring him against it. You cannot make people moderate toward their heroes just for fear of spoiling them. When a generous emotion is at high tide and the bands are playing and the boys are bellowing through the megaphone, and the variously distorted features of the idol are displayed from every house front, it is not always creditable to be judicious. "He

THE CROWDED FORUM

that hath not a dram of folly in his composition hath pounds of a worse material." A man may hold himself in check at such a time and say only what is wise. It may be that his wisdom dominates his impulses. But perhaps he lacks the impulses. It may be that he has a heart like a cash register and a pulse like a cold-boiled ham. We cannot admire him until we know. So far as he himself is concerned, no man need be ashamed of the foolish things he said to or about heroes when the fit was on him. As well regret the intemperate language of his honeymoon.

Such regret as one feels should be all on the hero's account. He is apt to be in a bad state when we are through with him. The majority of heroes are not praise-proof. It is nothing against a hero that he is not praise-proof. When a whole people set out to spoil a man, he is not to blame if they succeed. We who are not heroes cannot estimate the difficulty of resistance, but we can come somewhere near it by multiplying our own experience. We know how we feel when we are praised. The mind totters under a very

THE CROWDED FORUM

moderate amount of it. It must be a rock-bound kind of person that remains unmoved when a pleasant warm gush of flattery is playing on him. The best of us suspend all critical self-examination at such a moment, and Heaven knows what would happen if the thing lasted. It is a joy that fuddles. Fancy it raised to hero-power and lasting for twelve months! Would it leave us as it found us? The chances are we should be no fit company for any man. No one knows how he would turn out—whether like Major Goliath O'Grady Gahagan or like Tourguenieff's man who forever afterward had "the air of his own statue done in bronze and set up by national subscription"—but something queer, you may be sure, and in all probability ridiculous. For, as the satirist said of poverty, the worst thing about it is that it makes men ridiculous. These things have been freshly brought to mind, and just now the average man one knows would as lief not be a hero.

What a terrible onslaught was made on those heroic men in khaki. Everything was done to

THE CROWDED FORUM

shatter their minds and undermine their characters. If they were modest about what they had done, it only added to the demoralizing din. They could not disclaim without redoubling the applause. What disgusts at first becomes gradually endurable, then pleasant, then indispensable, then the hero is lost. The small poets begin on him immediately, and the air is soon buzzing with little odes. He shakes off the small poet at first with some annoyance. When an unspoiled warrior is put for the first time into minor verse he hates it. It makes him feel like a pressed pansy. No living man is a fit subject for poetry, and as soon as he feels at home in it that is the end of him. Nothing so saps a hero as persistent odes, and it is to the credit of the American people that in spite of their inconsiderate waste of heroes they spared them this. Then there are the kissing women and the flapping orators and the town hall speeches and the freedom of the city and the comparisons with Belisarius, Cæsar, Nelson, any of which, if prolonged, will ruin the average hero. It is a cruel thing.

THE CROWDED FORUM

The only hope is to do as Kitchener did, or Marchand or our own Lawton—treat the whole thing as a foolish love affair and go back to work. The hero should leave the instant he begins to take it seriously, if possible before the wind dies. A becalmed hero waiting around for more wind is in a bad way. So is one who has contracted the platform habit. A hero has begun to go to pieces when he has learned to like what he ought never to have heard.

A man does a fine thing that takes our fancy, so we reward him by denying him the privilege of hearing a word of sense for months at a time. Then comes a reaction, and we wonder what is the matter with him. It was all our fault, and the least we can do is to be sorrowfully patient with our handiwork. There may be a way of repairing the heroes we have damaged, though, as Carlyle points out, it is no easy task: "The resuscitation of a soul that has gone to asphyxia is no momentary or pleasant process, but a long and terrible one." A mind ravaged by applause deserves charity from the ravagers, and one

THE CROWDED FORUM

should know beforehand that it is as hard to keep a hero from spoiling on your hands as to keep cream through a thunderstorm.

THE CROWDED FORUM

IV

A "REMARKABLE" MAN

THE mention of the Defeated Candidate's name in the newspapers sets some old memories to stirring. So there was such a man, and what a turn he gave some of us in the dark days of a certain November an age or two ago. It makes one feel safe to see the name now; also a little foolish, for was there ever a political contest in which the enemy seemed only life size? He is no longer "in the public eye," as the magazines say, and for that reason it is no doubt improper to speak of him, which is a pity on some accounts. When a man of this sort is "in the public eye" there is no telling anything about his true dimensions. He is in there like a cinder and seems stupendous till you get him out. Why mention him now? To attack him? No more of that. The necessity of being serious about him was the worst hardship of the whole campaign. All that heavy moral artillery and handsome political invective just for *him!* No doubt the language was appro-

THE CROWDED FORUM

priate to the occasion, but it was not to the man. Napoleon at St. Helena, Boulanger in Belgium—get the man as far away as possible from the occasion if you would see him as he is. There were some “character studies” of him written before he was defeated, and very queer things they now seem,—mere allegories for the most part, assuming that he was an incarnate Principle, which no man ever is. It was a time when realism was unsafe. Some would say he compelled the admiration even of his foes; for several of the latter, while duly disapproving of him, pronounced him a “remarkable” man. Publicity always has its flunkeys, deferential to anything that has a crowd behind it. It is the optimism of a democracy. The man who carries several states must be great, or at least exceptional in some way. There is no allowance made for accidents in this domain of success. Does the two-spot never come uppermost when a big crowd shuffles the pack?

So it chances that there is nothing in all that has been said of the Candidate that in the least

THE CROWDED FORUM

applies to the Defeated Candidate, who happens to be publishing a newspaper somewhere in the west. A page of that publication is worth more than all the estimates on either side. In the first place the paper does not suggest any moral issue at all. The editor may be a good man or a bad man—it is hard to realize that it matters which. The main point is that he is not a man who would arrest attention for one instant. It is a schoolboy mind that drives that paper, no matter what the political writers say. Call him a brilliant demagogue, an Orson of the young Democracy, an Alcibiades, or whatever you like. His politics may be those of Lucifer, but his mind is of the age of innocence, whether it is innocent or not. That is the striking lesson of it—the amazing exiguity of this public man. How did the country happen to find him? And when intellects like that are detected, what risks of greatness we all run.

He has put his whole soul into that paper. He has struck his natural pace. If any man has a partisan grudge against him let him read a

THE CROWDED FORUM

page. Begin, say, with "Not every emperor wears a crown," and end with the passage: "Unlike Julius Cæsar and George Washington, Mr. McKinley did not reject the offer of a throne." If you were going to mend this man where would you begin? Not with his morals, surely, nor even with his politics. What George Eliot called the "taint of commonness," hard to describe as the odor of onions but just as clearly perceived —hangs over the character of this "remarkable" man. That he should have run for president shows how we let things slide. After that no one need despair. Let him push and there is a chance that the crowd will let him through. A commonplace speech at a hospitable moment may be enough for a start, and he, too, may become a personage with a career and with people to invent a character to account for it. And though he may have a hundred thousand duplicates, he will be a "remarkable" man till he winds up like Boulanger in Belgium or publishing a "remarkable" newspaper somewhere in the west.

THE CROWDED FORUM

V

OLD AND NEW DEBATERS

DURING the last few years we have plunged from one hot debate into another, and if for a moment the excitement has subsided over here, some other country has been sure to keep our feelings busy. Never in their lives have the generation born since the civil war seen the civilized man so rampant in controversy. One aspect of the thing is rather remarkable. This time of stress has not produced in the United States or England or France a single speech or bit of writing above the ordinary. For all the training of these great debates there have been no great debaters. Other crises have left a legacy of eloquence, but the man who can recall a single eloquent passage in all that has been said on the most absorbing topics of the last two years must have a memory like a bonded warehouse. To most of us it is a mere reminiscence of confused noise, the greater part of it inarticulate. The occasion has found its men of action but not of

THE CROWDED FORUM

speech. The lions that have come up out of Judah have not been very impressive in their roars. It is not due to any lack of sincerity or force of feeling. The blowing up of the *Maine*, the Rennes court-martial, the Boer ultimatum, even the small tempest of the Puerto Rican tariff have been stirring enough. It is only the art of arguing that has fallen on evil days.

The arguing man assumes as a rule that anything will do if it seems to be travelling his way. He commits himself to all sorts of non-essential points. As a Boer sympathizer, for instance, he found it his duty to show the trail of the serpent in England's entire South African experience since 1814, when fifteen years of black iniquity would serve his turn as well as eighty-five. So he offends the common sense of neutrals. Again, he would have free trade in Puerto Rico, let us say. Instead of merely pointing out that it is preferable, he straightway tells you any course but this is hellish inhumanity. So, when you nervously look up the facts and find nothing in them

THE CROWDED FORUM

to bear out comparisons with the Black Death or St. Bartholomew's Day, you are very likely to dismiss the whole thing from your mind. That is the trouble with our latter-day debaters. They breed distrust in the honest doubters. What is the use of raising one's whole vocabulary to the tenth power? It simply inflates the verbal currency. Other people involuntarily extract the tenth root of everything you say. The "traitor" and "tyrant" of our Philippine discussions have weakened debate and lessened the reserve strength of the English language. These things become merely conventional. They go through the same process as profanity, which, as we know, is hardly emphatic on the lips of the habitually profane. It is a most inartistic kind of arguing that gives the impression that you are either talking for effect or a little "hipped" on the subject. Many a good soul throws his chance away by forgetting this.

The old debaters, whether contending for a good cause or a bad, appreciated the value of mere plausibility. They counterfeited candor

THE CROWDED FORUM

and sanity if they had them not. Above all, they tried to ingratiate by admissions, and they never encumbered themselves with big, awkward assumptions of incredible villainy. Running through all the great controversial speeches and writings there is a vein of reasonableness and self-restraint. Whether it was Lincoln or Burke, or a Greek general, or Beelzebub in *Paradise Lost*, or one of Shakespeare's villains, they gave no impression of hypocrisy or hysteria. But the maladroit debater will somehow give this impression even though he is as sound in head and heart as one could wish. Stirring oratory is not that in which every sentence has a hectic flush.

But apart from mere ignorance of the art, a reason for the failure of our present debaters may be their distrust of the public. The public is not thought worthy of being talked to sensibly. There is a mortal terror of giving one's case away. A truth must be swaddled with overstatements when it walks abroad. You will find plenty of men who will talk more reasonably in private

THE CROWDED FORUM

than they would think of doing for the press or platform. Intelligent men do not as a rule assume, in talking with us privately, that all wisdom and all virtue are with them. They agree with us in some points, and they try to understand our point of view. But in addressing us collectively they will show the most shocking cynicism as to what we can understand. They prejudge us as altogether foolish, and talk to us accordingly. Many a thought will be held back because it is supposed to be too big for us. Yet, when has the public ever been hurt by breadth of view, and who ever delivered a significant message when he was tortured every minute by the dread of being misunderstood? The truth is, the public can stand from any man the best there is in him. No man ever made a deep impression who tried to do all his thinking in majorities. Our current controversies are for this reason needlessly dull. One cannot suppress the fanatic. He will be on hand to do his worst for every cause. But it is possible to take a kindlier view of popular intelligence and to aim

THE CROWDED FORUM

a little higher in one's style of arguments. For after all, the good debater, like the good workman in any other art, finds when he has made his masterpiece, that he has made his public, too.

THE CROWDED FORUM

VI

ASPERITIES OF PEACEMAKING

Is it because we are jingoes that we are so little stirred by the sort of things certain earnest writers are saying against war? That is what they would maintain. Goldwin Smith has been attacking the idea that a nation can cure itself of its vices by going to war with another nation. Tolstoi's well-known views have appeared in an English translation, and several other eminent writers have recently denounced war at some length. It has also become what is known as a "timely topic," which means that almost anything any one chooses to say about it finds its way into print. So it happens that many grown-up persons have published compositions on the relative merits of love and hate and the impropriety of bloodshed. With Tolstoi it is only a part of a pretty comprehensive gospel. He would turn us all at once into something pure and primitive and sweet, and, as regards art matters, into something exceedingly stupid,

THE CROWDED FORUM

getting rid of certain intellectual vices by abolishing intellect altogether, it would seem. But there is a holy flame in the old man, and he is really beyond us, and not at all to blame if we never catch up, and it is a pity if literature is to have nothing to do with the things that are not. He is an idealist through and through, and hates war no more than he hates every other curse that our sins bring down on us. The peace advocates of the newspapers are not usually of that stamp. I do not presume to question their motives, but the fine idealism they reveal on that subject does not seem to extend to other things. Truth, for example, is as good a thing as peace, and is needful even in advocating peace. They have steadily assumed that if you do not fall in with them you are an enemy to the cause. Does that follow?

What is the matter with us that, in spite of a longing for universal peace quite as strong as theirs, they no sooner begin to preach than we hunt for arguments on the other side? It may be our weak and sinful natures. It may be some-

THE CROWDED FORUM

thing in the way they do it. One has a right to consider before setting himself down as a murderous old war-dog just because he does not enjoy the average peace harangue. In the first place, they make the case too plain. It is an artificial and insincere simplicity, with all the perplexing things left out. Surely there are some perplexing things about man. With the reformer's man it is always a naked choice between heaven and hell. With God's man it is different. Nine times out of ten the poor devil does not know which is which, for the good and evil have been jumbled together and the colors have run, and even when he really wants to be an angel the results are mixed. How can you prescribe for him, if you do not know what he is like? It is a bad philosophy that is founded on omissions. Yet the peace talkers expurgate history for this purpose, as the temperance orator expurgates science, feeling that somehow the whole truth would hurt us and that the way to save souls is to go sneaking around the facts. And they treat us all as if we belonged to that class of warlike rhapsodists who

THE CROWDED FORUM

regard war as a sentimental tonic—quinine for our bad malarious morals. Not a word for those who are not so far gone.

“War,” said the late Dean Farrar, “is a fraction of that Armageddon struggle described in the Apocalypse,” and so on in a poetic strain very flattering to war. To which Goldwin Smith retorted that the dean “would touch less lightly on dread of the horrors of war as a motive for avoiding it if he had seen the wreck of a battlefield, the contents of a field hospital after a battle, or even the burning farms of the Transvaal, with the women and children turned adrift, as an eye-witness describes them, and desperately trying to rescue something from their homes.” So he would, no doubt, and his present language is quite absurd; but the peace enthusiast would “touch less lightly” on the difficulties of keeping out of war if he took more pains to know men as they are. It would be easy enough to put the world to rights if there were so little in it. Preaching against blood-thirstiness in general does not seem to fit when

THE CROWDED FORUM

you are tormented by the circumstances of some particular case, and wondering if war is the worse alternative. But the average reformer will have nothing to do with circumstance. He snubs it, acts as if he had never met it; if he "disapproves of Asia, Asia is no more."

More of us are with the peace people in their premises than they seem to think. We do not enjoy butchery, and are not gloating over Filipino bones or South African ashes. Theirs is not a voice crying in the wilderness. On the elements of morals we are agreed, and we dare go as far as the South Carolina poet:

The man who thinks God is too kind
To punish actions vile,
Is bad at heart, of unsound mind,
Or very juvenile.

Only, one does not feel like saying it very often, because it seems as if people must know. But we are with them at heart—these sparrows on the housetops—and they must make room for us by their side. It is foolish to go on living like a moral hermit when there is no need of it. But perhaps they enjoy it, and we may be *de trop*.

THE CROWDED FORUM

The chief objection is to the method employed. If the world is already so bad, what is the use of keeping it? If this country is hopelessly corrupt and democracy a failure, and conscience dried up, and commercialism rampant, and virtue all gone, why not leave us to go to our own place, like Judas? And what better route is there than war? The truth is, when a man begins to prophesy ruin because his country goes to war, he is apt before long, particularly if he is a little undersized, to pray for what he prophesies, just to punish the country and bring her to her senses—and vindicate him. And he counts up his dead compatriots with an enthusiasm that is not exactly pious, and he accepts defeat with a complacency that is not merely altruistic, and almost any degree of patriotism strikes him as excessive, and any kind of national rejoicing as vulgar. One may see this in him and still be peace-loving, and one may dislike it without being a war-dog. It often happens that what a man of this type sets down as lust for blood on your part is after all only a harmless hankering for com-

THE CROWDED FORUM

mon sense. It is a bad way to grow old. The memoirs of old men are so often full of it—the world winding up in darkness because their light fails. If we discount it a little now and then, it does not follow that we are cutthroats or even lukewarm in the interests of peace.

THE CROWDED FORUM

VII

MEASURING AN AMERICAN REPUTATION

SOME years ago an enterprising American college president conceived the notion of a Hall of Fame for great Americans, with a hundred judges to decide who should be glorified. Whereupon a serious-minded writer declared that to decide the question of fame by the majority vote of a hundred wise men was in some sort impious, because it left "the divine will out of the matter altogether." When people are enjoying themselves someone with a swollen conscience is sure to come along and complain about it. As if we were going to make Providence feel *de trop* by guessing about our great men. It is as good a game of chance as was ever thought of. It requires skill and knowledge and some searching of the heart, and the subject matter is intensely interesting. The results are surprising to the judges themselves and to everybody else. Every group of a hundred men, wise or foolish, would decide differently, and the same group would

THE CROWDED FORUM

change its mind in a month if its members were ordinarily progressive. For the longer you think and the further you read, the more reputations you discover, and some of the new are sure to crowd out the old ones. George Washington and a few others are fixtures, but the lesser names go in and out of your mind constantly, and how many you can find there and who they are will depend on what time of day it is. As to names like Elias Howe, your memory merely flirts with them. You have found twenty-nine great men and must have one more. William Morris Hunt is in, and so is Gilbert Stuart. Poe will not do, because he drank, and, besides, poetry is well enough represented as it is. Soldiers are not in your line, and they should be kept down anyhow for fear of militarism. A useful person is needed —an inventor. A sewing machine buzzes in the next room, and Elias Howe comes to mind, and you take him. There is a broad zone of indifference where you are lucky if you can find even a whim. In this haphazard region the best and wisest of men is no better than a mob.

THE CROWDED FORUM

What is the unit of measure—the foot-pound, ohm, volt or square millimeter of glory? Take one of the simpler problems. Here are Hunt, Howe, Stuart and Poe waiting to be graded. First find the common denominator of a sewing machine and the Lenox Lyceum. This will enable you to compare the inventive genius of Howe with Hunt's skill as an architect. Then see how many times the answer will go into Poe's *Raven* and Stuart's paintings of the presidents. Subtract five from Poe because he was so dissipated. Add two to Howe because, though he was reduced for years to driving an engine, he never took to drink. Be honest with yourself, but bear in mind that you alone cannot make a reputation. You must consider the point of view of other men and also of the angels. If you have no preference yourself, find one and take its measure. Do not forget that you are to decide not merely where glory is, but where it ought to be. When you have made up your mind do not touch it, but treat an opinion as if you had married it. Find out what you yourself think, what you think

THE CROWDED FORUM

other people are thinking, how the thing is looked at in heaven, and what sort of an influence it may have on the young. Out of it all must come a decision fit to be carved on imperishable stone.

It is matter for flashlights and bulletins. But we do not commemorate our dead in that manner. To correspond with actual conditions there should be a thousand halls of fame, and in each one a biographical dictionary on a whirligig. It would not do to have the same biographical dictionary. Reputations go up and down like stocks, whether men have been ten years dead or fifty. Yet if you come out with a list of your forty favorites caught on the fly you are charged with departing from absolute truth. There has never yet been a biographical compendium whose editor has not been blamed for leaving out names far more important than those he put in. Nevertheless it will be a bad thing for the honored dead if the time ever comes when we agree about them. Settle once and for all their order of merit and hundreds would never be heard of. Now, there is Elias Howe, who has at last got

THE CROWDED FORUM

what he deserved—a decent talking about. It is queer material for carving on stone, but no queerer than much that we put there. There are signs that the city of New York can be pretty frivolous even in bronze. The discussion is the main thing. Gossip responds to a human need, and gossip about dead men cannot hurt them. It clearly shows the stuff that reputations below a certain grade are made of. Many of the smaller glories owe their longevity to the lazy-mindedness of the survivors, for who can afford to be painstaking about such trifles?

How tell which is the greater of two men when neither is great at all? The best way is to shut your eyes and guess at it. If it were James K. Polk and Julius Cæsar it would be one thing. But it is James K. Polk and E. P. Roe, and Hunt, and Howe, and Dolly Madison. Guess, and think no more about it. If you were the editor of a biographical dictionary, part of the work would consist in this very thing. Some one would write in and complain that half a page was given to Jones and Brown was left out alto-

THE CROWDED FORUM

gether. Yet if you aim at the Jones point of thoroughness you should logically include not only Brown, but a hundred others. The graveyards are choked with men of the Jones degree. It is no doubt true. But what is the harm in guessing Jones? Oblivion will get them all in the long run; the final marks will not be ready till the day of judgment, and in the meanwhile why should we not discuss our taste in dead men?

THE CROWDED FORUM

VIII

DEMOCRATIC GENTILITY

A PRETTY row is sure to follow any public reference to good breeding, especially to an alleged criterion or condition precedent of good breeding. An Anglo-Saxon community cannot stand it. Once, when an eminent naval officer opposed the promotion of warrant officers on the ground that they lacked social qualifications, a United States senator all aglow with the spirit of Jean Jacques and Robert Burns and the Declaration called him a "snob" and a "coward" and a "conceited ass." I am not now concerned with the merits of the case, but only with the heat of the language. There are terrible passions in this field, and they lie very near the surface.

In England it is about the same, or possibly worse. A few years ago the best behaved of British weeklies quoted with approval in one of its book reviews the remark that a gentleman was a "man who played the game;" that is to say, fitted in well with the company he was thrown

THE CROWDED FORUM

with, did not cheat or interfere or insist on playing his own game or the wrong game at the wrong time. That set things going. Gentlemen who felt that this left them out wanted another definition. Correspondents squabbled with one another and with the editor, and exchanged volleys of quotations from the dictionary and the Bible and the Elizabethan poets and the Herald's College. Some said it all depended on the great-grandfather's occupation, which, of course, shocked the great-grandfatherless and brought out in rebuttal a host of proverbs on the order of "handsome is as handsome does." The writers sometimes reinforced their arguments by giving their addresses at highly respectable clubs, and one of them crushed his adversary by sheer weight of personal dignity. "Being myself in business," he said, "albeit a descendant of the princes of Wales of the old race as well as a descendant of that more modern stock, the Norman and Plantagenet kings and their alliances, I feel Mr. C.'s definition as a species of insult; but, thank the gods! the term 'gentleman' is de-

THE CROWDED FORUM

rived rather from a man's conduct toward others than from any fictitious virtue of ancestry."

The real cause of these disturbances is the odious nature of the facts themselves. One side says that there are such things as social distinctions; the other side, which is always the more numerous, says that such distinctions are wrong, and it does not want to have them mentioned. The champion of the "plain people" invariably has the advantage. He knows that the plain people have a rooted aversion to plain truths, and that each branch of our race has one social code for private use and another for public exhibition. You will never catch him in the indiscretion of a public allusion to social qualifications, though in private he may grade men according to the kind of cuffs they wear or snub the pure in heart merely because they chew tobacco. Everybody knows that manners, family, habits, clothes and like irrelevancies down to the smallest details of toothpick and napkin management are the chief bonds or barriers between men and between nations; that snobbery in one

THE CROWDED FORUM

form or another is eternal and omnipotent, and bigger than humanity itself. Not a herd of cattle without its "consciousness of kind," which implies a certain social hauteur toward every other kind. But it is not a subject to go before the crowd with. It is a principle on which we shape our whole lives, but when we speak above a whisper let us only say: "A man's a man for a' that." The crowd would rather be ill-served than admit for a moment that a man could be socially disqualified for his job, no matter what his job might be.

Once in a while we hear grumblings from abroad about the characters of our diplomatic representatives. Some one has said that many of them in the past had been "socially impossible." This may be absolutely untrue, but the point is that if it were clearly shown that American representatives were so regarded and that as a result the service suffered, we should make no open attempt to mend matters. A lesson might be learned and changes might be made from behind the scenes, but of one thing we are positive: An

THE CROWDED FORUM

American statesman would rise sublimely on the floor of the Senate in the full view of the plain people and say that if a good American was not good enough for a European power that power was a "snob," "coward" and "conceited ass," or words to that effect.

PART III

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

I

SETTING THE PACE

A FEARLESS preacher once reproved the Newport gentry for their worldly ways, and the subject was solemnly discussed in the newspapers for two solid weeks. It was a sort of court sermon. Though uncompromising toward sin, he did not for a minute forget the social position of the sinners. In fact, the size of the sin seemed to be in proportion to the importance of that social position, so there was no doubt a sweet side to the sorrow at the bigness of it. A rebuke like that is always reassuring to an aristocracy that is a little new at the business and, therefore, a little doubt-

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

ful of itself. The eyes of fifty million American citizens are upon you, so take care what you do, said he. It is a hard heart that this would not touch. And there is no class of people in the world that needs such recognition more than this aristocracy of ours, and they were grateful even for this polite untruth. The most discouraging thing about our fashionable society is that so few people know of it. If there were only a bigger crowd peering over the railing it would be more fun to be inside. Where is the good of being exclusive when so few realize that they are shut out? It takes something of a specialist to keep track even of their names. There is a fringe of socially ambitious people who know, and there are sporadic cases of an abnormal kind of interest in dry society data on the part of persons who have never met any of the participants and do not expect to meet them. But except for a half dozen or so of egregious persons, and these egregious mainly by their wealth, the names of our local leaders of fashion are to the average man as the names of Hindoo gods.

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

We have no loyal peasantry or deferential tradespeople or awestruck middle class. There is no common standard of fashionable values. Social distinctions assume a hundred thousand forms. There are about as many peerages as there are men. What is a leader of a cotillon to the average citizen compared to the Royal Arch. Something of his particular lodge? And there are mighty honors almost within his reach. May he not hope some day to be the Supreme Secretary of his order of the Hidden Sanctuary, and wear twelve badges and a red fez? The cards of invitation which our young Pendennis sticks in his looking glass do not even dazzle his landlady. Social triumphs are too esoteric over here. In general our dollarred gentry are envied only for their dollars. Specialists in fashionable matters assume a range of information that does not exist. The details of the society columns are cabalistic to all but a few, and the good or bad effects of what is technically called fashionable example may not reach across the street. And yet there is always some one watching nervously to see if

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

they drink more than they used to or play for higher stakes, or if the women are taking to cocktails or smoking cigarettes. If they find out anything they pass the word along, and straight-way a flurried moralist will ask if there is any virtue left among our leisure classes. "Wealth and luxury have changed greatly the atmosphere of American life." We are all in immediate danger of divorcing our wives and floating sinward on a flood of dry champagne.

By the cockfights of our ancestors I protest against the doctrine that such things are new. What past date have these people in mind? Was it when England's greatest jurist said an occasional booze expanded the emotions and mellowed the manners of her growing youth? Or was it when the leading statesmen of the century lived their whole lives out without getting even with their gambling debts? This among a class of people that might well have set the pace. Be-labor us as much as you like, but why let our forefathers off so easily? Making demi-gods of forefathers is an old practice. You would sup-

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

pose that people who wished to prove us worse than they would be at some pains to show us what manner of folk they were. As a rule they skip all that. They pass over our forefathers with gentle generalities. With us they are terribly concrete. There is no fair basis of comparison. They talk of forefathers as if they were a first wife. The second wife may be just as good, but she happens to be on hand. That is the trouble with us. We are blamed just because we are not dead.

It is not fair to compare the eighteenth century as seen in *Henry Esmond* with the twentieth century as seen on Fourteenth Street. Something should be allowed for stained-glass effects. We have chosen to fit up the past as a playroom for our imaginations. We arrange it picturequely and throw out the things we do not like. It is a good place for a rainy day, but how about spending our whole lives in it? Ruffs and powdered periwigs and very low bows, even profanity delighting by the quaintness of it—no better place for an aristocratic outlook on this mean

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

generation. But the sponging house and the eternal drunkenness and the mean servility of dependent classes, and the polite breakfast on the occasion of the hanging, and the omnipresent illiteracy—why not mention these things and others, if only to show that the real eighteenth century is what you have in mind? As the world moves along there are a lot of people in every generation who are sorry they came. They are instinctive partisans of any kind of forefather.

But to return to our fashionable exemplars. The truth of the matter is there is no social circle that could stand the scrutiny that is brought to bear upon what society reporters call the *élite*. There are scandals in Cornville just as bad. People write of our fashionable society with a lot of Ouidaesque notions at the back of their heads. Cynical, worldly, epigrammatic and *blasé*—where are all those characters of Mrs. Burton Harrison and the others who have followed her in a troop? Whatever our aristocracy may be, it is not effete. The novelty of external things has not worn off. In point of simplicity it compares

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

well with any other class, for simplicity is not a matter of cost. Some very expensive pleasures may be almost heartrending in their simplicity. A complex person would soon go mad, and there is nothing in them even for a corrupt heart. But people do not like to write of it as it is (even when they know) for fear of being dull.

There has grown up a fiction about the morals of this class and about the force of its example. We are badly in need of some one who will emphasize the unromantic truth. The thing that is ground into a candid mind, making its observations at first hand, is that the morals of those people are by no means their weakest spot. Like most classes of men and women, they are not so bad as they are painted, and a good deal stupider. And as to the example, he will have discovered this: He may travel fifty miles up and down and across Manhattan Island without meeting a single person who knows what that example is.

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

II

THE WALK UPTOWN

SHALL we New Yorkers be damned in the next world if we pause one instant in our warfare with municipal iniquity and take in the view? Is it the sin of Lot's wife for us ever to look around? Surely it is pardonable sometimes to take a vacation from reform and to be frankly pleased with things that are morally indifferent. Corruption will not get away. You will find it waiting to be belabored at the same old place when you come back. One ought not to be bruising the serpent all the time. The most vivacious snake-bruiser sometimes needs a rest. He works the better for it. Some say New Yorkers with the moral aim take too much rest. It is not true. Their hearts are always throbbing with political wrath. Corruption is their constant daily thought. They do not act, it is true, but they think and they talk and they expose without a pause. They never give their city a good word. That is their atonement for their ineffectiveness. That much they

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

are willing to do for reform's sake. They can at least abuse.

There is no queerer thing in the world than a good New Yorker's conscience. How would he define his city? As the cheerallest, hopeallest, most vitalizing big spot in a hemisphere or two, which it is in spite of everything? He would like to, but civic duty will not let him. Conscience requires that he shall define it as a long, narrow and very corrupt strip of land provided with insufficient facilities for rapid transit, and once the home of the Tweed ring; bounded on the east by a river over which a set of rascals are planning to build a bridge when what is needed is a tunnel, and on the west by a line of viciously administered docks; on the south lies New York bay opening widely to let in the scum of foreign races and Richard Croker when he returns from Europe. Conscience insists on accuracy of definition and on infinity of talk, but on not much more, as is shown on election day. A man must swell with rage over municipal corruption day and night, but it is quite proper for

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

him to dodge jury duty and to stay away from primaries.

The moral indignation is a good thing, since in time it may lead to action, but there is no reason why it should monopolize the soul and benumb all the faculties. You can fight evil without snubbing all the good things in life, and there are some of these good things in New York. Is it the part of a reactionary to say so? The New York of the better class of newspapers and of the conversation of its most loyal citizens is about the blackest place under the sun. The old lady who went through St. Louis with a rope tied around her and her six children lest the wicked should grab them would not venture New York in an armored train. It is not that the press says a word too much about our vices, but it never says anything about the other things. Yet who has ever been hurt by seeing more than one side of the truth? Can't a man work for improvement without being lopsided or wearing blinders? One would think that for a New Yorker to speak up for his city was to pitch his tent toward Tam-

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

many or Sodom, and that the only way to cure evil was to acknowledge no good.

It does not look much like Sodom as you walk uptown. There are street corners where the sin of a little cheerfulness is almost pardonable. Lexow and Mazet revelations and Ramapo and Croker would all roll off the mind for the moment if you would let them. At the risk of moral laxity I say this does no harm. It is not likely the devil could do much in the few minutes you were off guard. It is legitimate sometimes to look down a side street straight to the sunset at the other end without counting the number of gin-mills to the block. Do not confound material well-being with political health, as Mr. Godkin justly warned. But the sky is not upholstered with ward politics, and Tammany Hall is not yet a sign of the zodiac.

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

III

THE READING PUBLIC

AS THE autumn freshet of books comes down upon us the usual discussion of their superfluity promptly recurs. One writer says this century will be known as the century that was always reading about itself, and taunts the present generation with even putting the letters of the alphabet in their soup. Another lectures the whole tribe of publishers for giving the public what they want instead of what in the opinion of the lecturer they ought to have, and somebody else lectures him for not suggesting the proper remedy. And so it goes until there is a huge pile of printed matter all to the effect that printed matter is in excess. The present century may be known as the one that became panic-stricken at the sight of its own abundance.

When you come to think of it, there is no more reason why we should excite ourselves over the superabundance of printed words than over the increase in the amount of conversation. Inven-

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

tions have enabled us to print a part of that which used to be spoken and which perished in the saying. We have always heard that talk was cheap, and printed matter has become almost as inexpensive. Because we read a good deal of our talk now and throw it afterward in the waste basket, it does not follow that we are intellectually going to the dogs. The superfluous book is sometimes annoying, but so is the superfluous man. Every improvement in communication makes the bore more terrible. Nowadays he can get himself published as easily as at one time he could get himself invited out to dinner. So you meet him more frequently in print. But you meet everybody and everything more frequently in print. It is rather absurd to quarrel with print on that account or to blame the publishers exclusively. The more food there is in the world the more fools will be fed. It is not the fault of the food or the food producers.

When a dull book meets with great success some one always has a fling at the publishers. Of course, it would be better if

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

they maintained a high standard. But they are no more to be blamed than you or I for taking the world as they find it. And what would the dull man be doing if he were not poring over the dull page? Would he be drinking in some brilliant table talk, or studying art, or reading the Elizabethan dramatists? There is nothing in what we know of the dull man's daily life to make us think that he has been tempted to his ruin. Before dull books were printed dull men were probably duller yet. They may keep him from reading the average book, but he would then be doing some other thing equally average. Averageness is a quality we must put up with. And, after all, why is a poor, tawdry piece of writing so much worse than cheap chromos or crude, gaudy ornaments, or the thousand and one other things that machinery multiplies as we all travel up from barbarism? Men march toward civilization in column formation, and by the time the van has learned to admire the masters the rear is drawing reluctantly away from the totem pole. Anywhere in the middle you may

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

find a veneration for China pug dogs or an enthusiasm for Marie Corelli—still an advance. Literary people seem to think that every time a volume of Hall Caine is sold Shakespeare is to that extent neglected. It merely means that some semi-savage has reached the Hall Caine stage, and we should wish him godspeed on his way to Shakespeare. It is only when a pretended Shakespeare man lapses into Hall-Cainery that one need be excited.

As usual in these equinoctial debates, the line is neatly drawn between the hostile camps of the Scornful Few and the literary Democrats. “As for this vast new reading public,” says one of our leading novelists, “it is the vast old reading public with more means in its pocket of satisfying its crude, childish taste. Its head is the same empty head.” Another, heart and soul with the party of hauteur, and a Coriolanus to the plain people assails the “mechanical reader,” meaning by that the person “who makes it a rule to read,” whose head no book can fertilize, who borrows his opinions of literature. “To the mechanical

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

reader, books once read are not like growing things that strike root and intertwine branches, but like fossils ticketed and put away in the drawers of a geologist's cabinet; or rather, like prisoners condemned to life-long solitary imprisonment. In such a mind books never talk to each other."

On the opposing side there is the complacency of numbers and a boundless faith in the average American—the familiar belief that in the long run the people are just about right. "Healthy optimism," I believe, is the technical term—land of promise and the goose hangs high, warm hearts and paper collars, beautiful thoughts in frowsy heads, and what is best is also simplest, and "you can't fool the people all the time," and the throbbing pulse of common humanity, and the sterling worth of the man in the street, and the divine right of the thing that gets the votes, for whatever is greatest gets them. It seems as if never a day had passed without a whirl of these rousing sentiments.

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

Now, I too once fought (as a private of course) on the side of the Scornful and harpooned the public with all my might, but somehow or other the old hippopotamus never felt it. I too not doubting that I was a first cabin passenger stood proudly among the few and let drive at mechanical readers and writers and critics and multitudes and blamed everybody for not being like somebody, and somebody for not being like me, and thought mediocrity would know itself from my description and feel ashamed and perhaps die, and was particularly devastating among fools and could have wept when they did not know it and took me for one of themselves. But the pleasure of it passes and there is never any profit in it to anybody. Of course people are a little exasperating when they talk about books—which seem to go through the mind for the most part like beans through a tube—and so uniform are they and so gregarious, forty feeding as one, that it seems as if Nature turned out men's souls as from a waffle-iron. And it is the more disturbing because we know Nature does

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

nothing of the sort but gives them personal preferences in clothes and food and cigars. Each swears in different language at his toothache and takes a different woman for his wife. Pinch a member of the reading public and you will find that he is real. But his personal taste in books is harder to get at than his secret vices.

But why need one be so bitter about it? Because a reader is inarticulate and cannot prove that green things with twining branches grow in his fertilized head, it does not follow that he is mechanical. And suppose he is mechanical and bears the needless burden of other people's tastes and potters away at self-improvement when he has nothing to improve, there is nothing in it so very dreadful. Literary people are forever judging the quality of the mind by the turn of expression. Such sniffs at the banal remark and the empty sentence, such holy wrath at unproductive reading; the minute a poor wretch swallows an epic they look at his tongue for a sign. They expect things of people as readers

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

that they do not expect of them as men. To most men the platitude is as natural as the bark to a dog, and if feeling were measured by eloquence there would be no family ties. The dull man is not only entitled to his dull book but is privileged to talk of masterpieces in his dull way, and there is no more reason for railing at him in his relation to books than in his relation to his government, and his God, and his green grocer, and his friends, whom perhaps he bores most frightfully, and who therefore have a greater grievance than true literature can complain of. Taking people as they are, considering whom they marry, and what they eat and how they live and what they say and how they say it, we must in common sense conclude that their literary taste is the least thing that is the matter with them. But literary-mindedness sees only the one thing; it would reduce the universe to a coterie, control the birthrate of this sphere and breed only Browning-readers. The question is not literary but biological. It is not a humane view of us ex-barbarians. Give us time, and meanwhile

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

thank Heaven that for the present we are at least tailless.

It is one side of a larger problem, which is rather complex. Another part of it is preying on the vitals of the political economists, and over still another an enthusiastic group of sociologists are rapidly growing mad. If we could tell what the millions ought to have we should be in a fair way to settle the world's future offhand. Nor is there any hope of a general reaction. The society of the future is sure to be more tempted and embarrassed by the multitude of its opportunities than we are now.

Critics seem often ill at ease in the bad company of this every-day world. They find no pleasure in what is merely crude and laughable and have only harsh words for a stage of development. You might as well lampoon a hemisphere. They do not sneer at children with their primers, but for the average man with the average book they have no mercy. Their real grievance is with the number of people there are in the world, but for my part I believe that were it not for the

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

presence of the unwashed and the half-educated, the formless, queer and incomplete, the unreasonable and absurd, the infinite shapes of the delightful human tadpole, the horizon would not wear so broad a grin.

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

IV

REFORMERS AND BROOMSTICKS

A FEW years ago a number of our protectors in the press were greatly alarmed by reports of brutal hazing at West Point. Cadets had been made to stand upon their heads, sing songs, ride on broomsticks, and eat tabasco sauce. Congress appointed a committee of inquiry, and finding the reports in part true very properly took steps to improve the discipline, which happy consummation would in all likelihood have come about had our moral guardians scared us less. For after all nothing very horrible was disclosed by the inquiry. If those cadets deserve pity, we do, too. Most of us have eaten worse things than tabasco sauce. There was, for example, a certain compound of vinegar and wheel grease which—but that is a fraternal secret. Though not trained for warriors, we, too, have eaten soap. Some of us may not have stood on our heads in bath tubs—bath tubs are not always convenient at the time—but we know from experience of the

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

higher education that pretty effective things can be done with a pump. And there was a long, hard board in the hands of a strong man—hardest board, strongest man we have ever known—which must have been as well adapted to its purpose as anything they had at West Point. Brutal? We thought so then, decidedly. “Inhuman man, curse on thy barbarous art, and blasted be thy murder-aiming eye.” That was the thought that struck us when the board did. It was not the way young Emerson was treated. The other boys seemed to know by instinct that he was going to be a great thinker when he grew up. Of heroes, statesmen and philosophers there are a plenty who never passed through any such ordeal in youth. It was clear to us even then that man may be great without it. On the other hand, there have been many cases of serious and lasting damage done to beings of a fine but fragile mould. Our tormentors, therefore, ran a great risk. In banging us around they might have thumped out a strain of real poetry in us or spoiled us for the ambassadorship at St. James.

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

But did they? Ask our guardian angels. We only know—and there are some millions of us survivors—that if this blessed land has lost a few frail poets in the process, it has been saved from a far greater number of prigs. Few men who have been through it will tell you it is altogether bad.

This does not argue any indifference toward the extreme forms of hazing. Nor does any rational veteran feel that all the hardships of his own experience are strictly necessary to those who come later to the test. You can teach manners without taking the skin off. To be keel-hauled like the young man in *Snarleyow* is not the only cure for conceit. But the standard in the matter is not an old man's standard. Nor is it a standard of little French boys with their governesses, or of flabby, contemplative German youths. We fogies who write for the papers may as well remember that. Each generation of Anglo-Saxons is in an absurd hurry to stretch itself on the rack of this tough world. They must be at self-government from the very start. They

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

constitute vigilance committees on the frontiers of life to apply lynch law to vices in the germ. It is not thorough, for see what slips through; and it is not just in a nice, respectable sense, but it is not altogether bad for the race, and probably saves more souls than it damns.

And if it is sometimes carried to excess it is still oftener withheld by lack of early advantages from the people who need it most—the men who cannot take a joke, who must be shielded from reality and double-barred against plain speech. To criticize is to wound; to laugh is to make enemies for life. So you must tiptoe as in a sick room lest some small vanity may take alarm. Meeting them now, we are too late. Middle age is the conventional garden where the little pomposities are allowed to bloom. Youth is the time for weeding out the little pompositives so that they will not grow again. Caught then and badgered and guyed and “roasted,” something might have been done, and with little risk of a broken spirit, for most of us start with a large enough stock of egotism to last through the siege. The

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

time comes soon enough when people have to keep their hands off and sneer behind our backs. There should be a season consecrated to the frank and primitive method. Otherwise we might grow up to scratch and bite like French deputies or pull hair like respectable members of the Austrian reichstag in their middle age.

It seems that the committee did not take all the goings on at West Point with equal seriousness, as the newspapers did. The report admits that "Many of the things done by the upper classmen were boyish pranks." At the same time, in view of the consternation this might cause our nursery governesses, it went on to say that even these boyish pranks "are frequently conducted in such a way as to outrage the noblest feelings of the human heart," and cited as an instance the fact that the son of a distinguished soldier had been compelled to ride a broomstick up and down the company street. It was determined to prevent the repetition of these indignities.

So far so good; but the spirit that prompted the broomstick atrocity is likely to persist, and

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

without laying a hand on this young gentleman they might have made him just as miserable. That is where the power of the state breaks down. Nothing can save our self-esteem from a coat of tar and feathers, and it gets it frequently. Noble feelings have been outraged even in Congress. One legislator has been known to imply that another did not speak the truth. Yet a belief that he is not a liar is one of the noblest feelings in the breast of a Congressman. He would as lief ride a broomstick as be robbed of it. As a matter of fact, the conditions of this boisterous planet are hopelessly unfit for any soul that could not stand the equivalent of that broomstick test in the days of his lusty youth. If Congress could only hedge him in completely, what a blessed little bijou of a man he would grow up to be.

But Congress will not hedge him in. Both the committee and the cadets acted with good sense and brought the affair to a reasonable ending. The moral of it has nothing to do with either of these but with us outsiders. How we take on about such matters, we the professional croakers,

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

who have but one note in our register, the same old solemn bull-frog note for everything that happens. When things are really very bad what shall we have to say to them?

Our language is rich enough in disapproving adjectives, and it is a pity to use the same set for crimes and trifles. Yet in the apoplexy of our discontent we waste the fiercest of them on some assassin with a crooked pin or tyrant with a broomstick. A case for discipline; young men had broken the rules of an institution and fought and badgered one another and immediately there arose a chorus of Did you evers, and a wagging of fungus heads all over the country. A small but very serious group argued in favor of it, holding that it was part of a scientific plan for the making of officers and gentlemen. Precisely that degree of scuffling and violation of rules was necessary to develop true courage. The rest of us saw in it the impending smash-up of young manhood, and for weeks there was a pest of great moral owls, worse than a plague of Egypt.

Whether or not a moral can be drawn depends

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

wholly on the drawer. It is like the rabbit in the juggler's hat. Smoking hot shapes from Tartarus were ramping about this country wherever we looked. That West Point affair was not, as you might think, a mere instance of stupid horseplay, calling, perhaps, for the prompt expulsion of the offenders. It was a sign of the times, and a devil's footprint, and it showed how the curse of an unrighteous federal policy has tainted everything. Corrupt the morality at the centre, and this is what you get. Pollute the flag in the Philippines, and our sons shall constrain their schoolmates to ride the contumelious broomstick.

And the end of it was just what it would have been if we had not lost a single night's sleep. Such are the blessings of a tutelary and meticulous press. But everything has its sermon, and the text of this is to be found not in the doings of the young, but in the comments of their elders. It is, as I take it, that if there is one thing worse than the savagery of youth, it is the pompous rigidity of middle age as exhibited in this discussion.

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

But is it not what the people want, and might they not misunderstand any other course? The chances are that they would endure more common sense than we dare to give them. After all it is not a lachrymose people, whatever you may say. You can tell that from their faces and from the air they breathe. A fairly cheerful race, and not without a certain sense of a *modus in rebus*, it does not require the moral of every small event to be hammered in with a pile-driver. One set of words for the ruin of the state, another for the rudeness of our children—that is what they expect from us, and even though we should be misunderstood we shall not burn for it.

PART IV

**ADVENTURES OF A PLAY-
GOER**

I

ON SEEING TEN BAD PLAYS

HAD I an artist's soul I should be somewhat soured by what I have gone through. As it is, I have fought down all bitterness of heart by the aid of a little philosophy. A man needs philosophy more for the commonplaces of this world than he does for its miseries, ennui being a stedier foe than pain. I therefore offer my philosophy of the commonplace in the American drama and literature. It is not deep, but it is at least bland, and it may help to allay irritation in certain moods. There is enough of polished sarcasm, and of cynicism there is already too

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

much. What we need is something that will aid us in matters of routine.

In the first place I swear by all that is holiest in democracy—by the boiled onions of the plain people, by their even plainer wives, by the fire-sides of Tom, Dick and Harry, by the sanctity of the bigger figure, by the sacred whoops of the majority—that the usual man is not to blame for wanting the usual thing. Hallcainery has its place in the world. Indeed, I believe it altogether healthy, hopeful, and respectable, and if I thought otherwise I should lose all faith in representative institutions. There are a few who never weary of saying spiteful things about literary mediocrity. They have no patience with development or kindness for beginnings; they would condemn every tadpole as a sort of apostate frog. Why are they so petulant with majorities? Humanity would pine away on masterpieces; yet many would have you think that the journey from savagery to high art must be made in total silence, with nothing to read on the way. Our plays are relatively good, being no further below

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

the drama than they are above tomtoms and human sacrifice. Blessed is vulgar "reading-matter," for without it people might eat one another. No race ever sinks from Hallcainery into barbarism; it rises from barbarism to Hallcainery, whence in time it may emerge.

And who shall say that our plays are not as good as our politics, or our writers as our Senators? Do we expect brilliancy in our statesmen? We are thankful enough in this country for a good candidate, let who will be clever. If a large city can, after intense intellectual efforts, choose for its mayor a man who merely will not steal from it, we consider it a triumph of the suffrage. So moderate are our expectations in this field that if ordinary intelligence be super-added, it seems a piece of luck. We are overjoyed at any sign that the nation's choice is up to the nation's average; and time and again you hear a thing called statesmanlike, which in private life would be just on the safe side of sanity. Mr. McKinley's refusal of a third term was regarded as a masterstroke of wisdom, and we have

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

all read praises of Mr. Roosevelt's achievements which are deserved as well by anybody we ever knew. Nobody praises us when we come home sober of an evening, or speak a good average sentence, or draw a good average breath; and sturdy virtues that keep us out of the police court for weeks at a time are not even mentioned by the family. But by these negative signs you can often tell a statesman, for politics is a place of humble hopes and strangely modest requirements, where all are good who are not criminal and all are wise who are not ridiculously otherwise. Any one who is used to the accidents of majorities should acquire this habit of mind. But the literary and artistic people persist in the most exorbitant demands at a point where the least should be logically expected, that is, the tastes of a crowd. And if the majority is against them, they scold it and the thing it chooses, and having lost their tempers and tired their friends, and troubled a number of honest creatures who have not the least idea what it is all about, they feel that they have been doing wonders for what they

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

call artistic standards. Right enough views, but the wrong occasion. We expect only peace in a cable car; for ecstasies we must look somewhere else.

If high art deserves its ecstasies, low art deserves its consolations; and if there is any way of making better terms with humdrum and escaping the spasms of reform, it is our plain business to find it. St. Paul said, keep the body under. I say unto you, keep the mind under on seeing 'American plays. Be "contentit wi' little and canty wi' mair;" smile though the smile looks sometimes like a rictus; get the point of view of the original erect ape-man (*pithecanthropus erectus*); and if at any time you are afflicted by a play that is particularly bad and popular, consider the growth of our manufactures and sing "My Country, 'Tis of Thee." To express one's own tastes is reasonable, but to worry too much over other people's leads to a useless violence. Some wish to murder Hall Caine. I believe it would be inexpedient to do so, and possibly wrong. I believe Mr. Clyde Fitch as truly repre-

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

sents New York as Senator Peffer did Kansas or Mr. Bryan the West; and the more I see of audiences the surer I am that to massacre is the only way to reform.

Unwilling to be dependent longer on the bounty of her rich guardian the high-spirited *ingénue* in light blue leaves her luxurious home to teach school in a distant village. Being very much of a lady she is obliged to walk as if the stage floor were red hot, and to speak in a high trilling voice with a foreign accent—a course that instantly wins for her the love of every one she meets. But the guardian comes to urge her to return to what, as a gentleman of wealth and refinement, he is obliged to call “me home.” They are talking alone, but as soon as she begins to explain that self-respect will not permit her to remain with him, now that she knows the fortune is not really hers, the violins play softly and from every door and alley the villagers come pouring in. A sentimental conversation between people they barely know will draw villagers to the spot for miles around. So when the heroine and her

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

guardian are at their saddest everybody is punctually in place. It is all very exasperating, and the superior person, who has no business to be there, will ask you if it is Art. It is not Art, but the stout lady in the seat behind you is nearly bursting with sobs, and a large number of pocket handkerchiefs are fluttering in the aisles. With this particular audience Art could do nothing at all. Then comes humor in its more awful forms. Thrice-explained humor, with long waits for the effects; humor accompanied by the hilarious roars of the man who made it. And for half an hour there is as genuine enjoyment as you ever saw, and at the very heaviest of horse-plays the stout lady behind you says, "Isn't that rich?" Elevate the stage? Perhaps you can, but it will be a good many generations before those people will be ready for it. A quarter of an inch elevation would spoil the whole thing for them.

There is plenty of room for a good theatre, but there is no use in hoping that it will draw away the crowds from the class of plays that are now successful. These plays will continue, or

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

others just as bad. They are wonderfully adapted to the people who go to see them, and as time goes on this element of the population is bound to increase. There are more below than above them. It is absurd for the superior person to ask them if it is Art. He would not take on like that about a ball game or a merry-go-round. And at a country fair or sociable or "sugar eat" he would not be so savage about bad taste. But a simple, hearty New York audience abandoning itself to the innocent, if rude, pleasures of the average play has no mercy from him for the amazing reason that it is not Art. As if simplicity required a background of hen roosts and apple orchards and all primitive men tucked their trousers in their boots. He is a child of nature, the New York playgoer, even if he is not picturesque, and he has an honest and wholesome regard for whatever is atrocious in art. Put him on the diet of the superior person and he would soon starve.

There must be bad plays. You cannot civilize the whole crowd of us at once, and those hideous

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

early stages of artistic appreciation cannot be skipped. There is much cheerless writing on a subject that from certain points of view is almost cheerful. Compare the worst successful New York play with a war dance or with certain Zulu sports. Things have greatly improved. How did the same class use to amuse themselves? As to moral lessons, the poorest of successful plays is remarkably vigorous and insistent. No sign of decay there. In fact, the worse the art the more blatant the moral. No New York playgoer is likely to forget for one moment that virtue is an admirable thing. Is it not cheerful to think of the big audiences going night after night to have the same elementary moral lessons pounded in? You want your moral lesson served artistically or you will not take it at all. Perhaps you would as lief see the wicked triumph for a change. But these people are content with virtue in the raw. They are not after new ideas, but want some one to say a good word for those they have already. On no account must you meddle with their minds.

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

The moral of all this is that one ought to try and see the bright side of the situation, if such a thing is to be found, and suppress those murderous feelings toward what after all is a worthy class of citizens and good building material for the state. In spite of artistic merit and intelligence good plays may succeed, and some day the experiment will be tried on a large scale; but in the meanwhile all the philosophy that you can summon and patience with those who like the plays they have. The undiscriminating benignity of audiences almost drives you mad. Why do they not rise from their places and burn and slay? How easy to lynch the manager, if they only knew. But they are having a good time for all your splutter about Art, and if you can see any signs of demoralization in their pleasant moon faces you are a cynic at heart. For whatever our stage is, it supplies the unseasoned food that is relished in the lusty infancy of Art.

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

II

THE SPAN OF THE STAGE

AGES ago when we were all young and went to evening parties, there was always, it will be recalled, at least one blasé guest who entered with a look of pain and remained with conscious cynicism. So the world is still at it, he seemed to say, as if from centuries of experience (most of it dark), looking more bored than mortal man could ever feel—as bored perhaps as Satan might be at an afternoon tea with cherubs. But he went home no earlier than any one else and had you at any time felt his pulse you would have found it pumping away as cheerfully as other people's. It was only that he would not confess his indefensible emotions. It is the same way with some of us playgoers. We profess to enjoy only as we judge, but night after night we can fold up our judgment like an opera hat and contentedly sit with it under the seat, though we damn the play with it afterwards. It is just this lenient play-going mood that makes stage

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

criticism seem unreal. The intellect is detachable. Sometimes you are happier if you keep it on; sometimes you feel better without it; at a certain kind of conventional play it is simply poisonous.

I have been reading some inappropriately intelligent remarks on a simple melodrama of Indian fights and primitive valor, wherein the hero is a Western scout, a noble, athletic creature, a child of nature and of the Leatherstocking Tales, who is full of the moon and stars and the Great Spirit, and does not know how heroic he is when he saves a regiment at the risk of his life. The critic says the character is not life-like, as if it mattered, and adds that he is beneath the standard of Broadway, as if there were one. This hero belongs to the juvenilia of our stage, and if you kill him you will find yourself embarked on a career of slaughter. There have been a dozen like him this year and last. There is no reason why criticism should straighten itself up with this sudden dignity and let the other eleven go through. Classify him and let him alone; enjoy

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

the moment if you can; forget your age and education and everything else; feel on the top of your bald head for sunny curls, and try and wonder how the play will turn out. Will the Indians get him? It may be his gun will go off and shoot the orchestra. There is always something to wonder at. Where there's a will, there's a way. A play may be seen with two standards: The standard of what you have previously seen or read or studied, and the standard of what you would have been doing if you had stayed at home that evening. The average play does not compete with Shakespeare but with the evening papers or a game of cards or the bosom of the average family.

Despise not the raw virtue, black vice and scalping knives of casual melodrama unless you are ready to despise the society hodge-podge and the merely spectacular historical play. The common defect is the unrealized men and women. We reverse the practice of the Elizabethans and label characters instead of scenery. They asked their audience to believe that this was a wall and

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

that a gate-post. We do the wall and post to the life, but say, will you please believe that these jumping-jacks are human beings. Yet our audience is well trained, ready to take the will for the deed, and in no hurry to argue itself out of a place to spend its evenings. If you think coolly of the playwright's work, you will turn the stage into a solitude. In a month of playgoing I found only one play that met the tests of afterthought, but there were very few that did not suffice for the moment.

We think of the theatre as a great, grinding machine for expressing the obvious, a show-place for large adventures of body and soul, unsuited as a bass-drum to lighter arguments. Some say the theatre can take nothing up till the other arts are through with it. Then a play like *Old Heidelberg* comes along and succeeds where many poets fail through sheer clumsiness. It is by no means a great play, and it deals with the lightest of themes. An unheroic young prince whom the restraints of a petty court hardly permit to draw a natural breath, suddenly finds him-

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

self free to lead his own life at the university. For the first time he meets people on a common footing and can be foolish and spontaneous and undignified and young, and make a noise and fall genuinely in love with his landlord's pretty daughter. So he comes to life and after his first bewilderment does all these things with a zest that is good to see and resolves to keep on doing them forevermore, but in the midst of it all he is summoned back to the court to assume the regency. Being as I have said an utterly unheroic person, he obeys, and takes leave of his sweetheart and his friends in a way that makes you pity all commonplace human princes. Later he revisits the university thinking to find everything the same, but he has changed and so have the students. Somehow no one can unbend and the meeting is absurdly ceremonious, empty and forlorn. Then the final parting with his sweetheart, for his marriage, of course, is an affair of state, and so his holiday ends. After all there was nothing in it worth losing a kingdom for. There was no great sorrow here, nothing tempestuous to wreck

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

a life. His royal middle age will find it a choice reasonably made. But an epicure of emotion could probably show that the best seasoning for a delightful regret is a prosaic preference for the thing you chose. The imagination has better sport with what is a little beyond the range of real desire, and I daresay Prince Heinrich's grief was the most agreeable shade of the blues imaginable.

So the same old stage that plays the passions on a steam piano can be as delicately reminiscent as a violin, and this playwright can make a light regret for outgrown things more poignant than D'Annunzio could the pain of an amputation.

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

III

ON CERTAIN "PROBLEM" PLAYS

D'ANNUNZIO in his English translation seems a monotonous and unsmiling young man of restricted interests, who, failing in the effects of art, falls back upon the merely horrible. With murder or mutilation or incest in the wind, you will stay on to the end, and there is never a moment when it is not in the wind. Portents and premonitions, fever fits and chills keep the doom incessantly impending, and the unfortunate characters are not *human* beings at all, but merely foregone conclusions. It fixes the attention as surely as the gong of an ambulance. It is the interest of deferred brutality, the common device of those who seek a short cut to strong writing, for people will often confound the sources of their emotion and define a primitive animal zest in complicated art terms. In an early chapter of one of Zola's novels, a young girl comes to a horrible death from an explosion, and in the remainder of the book he recurs at short

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

intervals to the mangled body of the fair young girl ripped open by dynamite. A fascinated reviewer described the expedient as a wonderfully skilful use of the Wagnerian *leit motiv*. If the kind of interest does not matter, it should be easy to start a thrill, for people of artistic temperament are as likely as not to mistake their backbones for their souls, and once a-quiver, they are as indifferent as jelly-bags to the cause of it. The cheats of the artistic temper are seldom caught by self-analysis, and few of d'Annunzio's admirers know how they came by their goose-flesh. In the *Dead City* the fictitious element of mere ghastliness is so nearly the whole thing that there is nothing left for art to do. In this uninspired following of the *Oedipus*, ancient Greek seemliness gives way to modern Latin unreserve, and Nemesis becomes a buzzard, and a little man bustles officiously among horrors which only a genius could discreetly deal with.

The offence of the plays is not in their subjects but in their methods, and the offended part of us is not our morals but our taste. The irk-

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

some continuity of the passions, the fewness and fixity of the ideas, the unauthenticated emotions, the fatal absence of humor leave us with the sense of humanity unrealized and a world shut out. While there are afflicted people like those in the *Dead City*, it is cheerful to think that there are at least sanitariums with kind attendants and capable house physicians, and that one encounters them singly in the outside world, never a whole troop of them at once. D'Annunzio measures tragedy by the mere bulk of suffering. If murder is to be done in the end, he sprinkles blood in the first act, gouges out an eye in the second, cuts off a head in the third. He supplements adultery by the amputation of a woman's hands, and enhances incest by a most pathetic case of total blindness and a final drowning scene. Not that this is the whole story. There is symbolism, and there are the Herculean efforts of a minor poet to rise to the height of his great argument. And it is well known that minor poetry is of all things the most perishable. Truth may traverse many languages and laugh-

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

ter may drift around the world, but minor poetry dies on the frontier of its own barnyard. It is a field of endeavor wherein the taste of the words makes all the difference. But Ibsen can hold up his head in English, and so can Sudermann, and it is hard to believe that d'Annunzio, as a playwright, would so ignominiously disappear if there had been more of him to start with.

Sudermann's *Joy of Living* profits greatly by comparison. Those who called it the highest peak of the intellectual drama in modern times were probably measuring Sudermann in units of Mr. Clyde Fitch, but they might safely have said it was one of the largest toads in the season's dramatic puddle. It was certainly the most "literary," the most "psychological," the best presented, and, above all, the most debated. The ancient story of the unfaithful wife and her excuses, the trusting husband who is undeuceived, the disloyal friend, despair, atonement, suicide, is told again, but in a modern, analytical way. The wife's sin sprang from her higher nature. Her soul, it seems, was fit for better

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

company. The other man was on her spiritual plane, while her husband, though amiable and worthy, was intellectually several pegs below her. Should she not taste the joy of living? Better to have soared and suffered than never to have soared at all. So Beata soared away from the marriage tie at the behest of the joy of living. But only for a little while, and the three short years of sin were followed by twelve of atonement. She made her husband happy, and Richard, her former lover, became his closest friend. She induced her husband to resign his seat in Parliament in order that Richard's brilliant gifts might have a fair field. Michael, the husband, loyal and unsuspicious, and believing with her in Richard's genius, threw himself into the canvass heart and soul. Richard was elected, but in a campaign pamphlet allusion was made to a scandal involving Michael's honor, and upon questioning his wife and Richard he learned the truth. All three being of noble birth, it was clear that in these circumstances somebody must die; but a duel would bring public disgrace upon two

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

families. Richard therefore resolved on suicide. Bombardinian was hit and Hononchroton-thologos must die. One may not see the logic of it, quite; but it is undoubtedly the rule of aristocracy or stagecraft. In their last interview Beata reads his intention in his face and makes up her mind to kill herself that he may live. Her sudden death will seem more plausible, for she has heart disease. At a luncheon given by her husband to the chiefs of the party, ostensibly in honor of Richard's success, but really to quiet suspicion, she makes an ironical speech in praise of the joy of living and takes poison. After her death the two men read a letter she has left saying that Richard now must live. He agrees to live, and the play is ended.

Shall we fly to our hearthstones, like the good old-fashioned critic of the stage, and with purple cheeks burst into alliterative wrath and call it a "fetid phantasy"? Must we be fierce as fogies and tear the language all to smithereens trying to find things bad enough to say of "tainted

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

talent" and of "putrid plays" and all the "slithering slime" of "poisoned pruriency"? Or dare we at this late day be less robustious? To condemn the play, as many have done, on the strength of the theme alone would commit one to a ruthless policy. The world has gone too far; too many novels and poems and plays are framed on it; the classics are still too fresh in our minds; books are too accessible, even to the young, for any such spinster censorship. The main defect of the play is its limitation of interest. The "problem" that has lately usurped the stage—the only problem, they would have us think, that of husband and wife and a *tertium quid*, whether male or female—is becoming wearisome even to those who are firmly convinced that monogamy will last of itself though they strike no blow for it. Clever as Sudermann is, he has failed to suggest in his naked souls the least variety. He catches a single emotion from life and isolates it. Beata lives and dies with it. You would never guess it was part of her higher life if he did not tell you so. Nor is there anything in Richard

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

to explain why she is drawn to him. It is taken for granted that they are spiritual mates, and a great deal results from it. Somehow or other we are to assume that the angels contrived it, and if human institutions stand in the way, they must be swept aside by a noble sin. Their souls are endowed with heavenly humps of the same pattern. It is intellectually bare, purely emotional, the mechanics of unlawful love, and though it is most skilfully devised, you watch it only as a game and think what a tight and narrow little place the present stage is. Why should we be so mercilessly confined? A man is larger than his largest passion; a woman is better than her love, and souls that run like tram-cars on their rails make for the madhouse in the outside world. But the poor starvelings of the stage must shiver always in their moral barebones, and because their maker could not give them flesh we say, How searching his "psychology"! Those who have a birthright to their art always suggest complexity. From them you guess a world of many things, however simple their means may seem.

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

They never keep you staring stupidly at any single pinwheel of passion.

Nor do they, like Mr. Bernard Shaw, aim merely to prove something. It is well known that Mr. Shaw does not wish to be regarded as merely brilliant. He demands a fair judgment on the truth of what he has to say apart from his manner of saying it. He professes a message and he is not satisfied with a smile of intellectual pleasure or a stare of astonishment. Like most sensitive and clever men, he hates an attempt to classify him, and he would try to squirm out of any adjective that is at all definite. At a public meeting not long ago, some one having introduced him with the remark that his only fault was that he was too talented, he rose and said that his talents were but ordinary and that his strong point had always been his character. But though a very clever man, Mr. Shaw does not understand some of the simplest laws of human nature. He is not even aware of the danger of being amusing. People learn while they laugh, but very few of them know that they are learn-

'ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

ing. When the midriff resumes its former place the mind pretty generally goes on as before, perhaps a little repentant. True prophets have sometimes been great humorists (witness Job), but their fame as prophets, I believe, was mainly posthumous. Cervantes laughed Spain's chivalry away, but meanwhile Cervantes died. If Mr. Shaw were always right, his manner before the world would be sadly against him. The world expects from its serious men a certain degree of dulness.

Compared with most of our playwrights, Mr. Shaw is not only far more entertaining than they, but sounder. It is only when we compare him (as he expressly demands) with the best of all time, that he goes to pieces. All great playwrights have seen that every man was something more than a leading motive. They have never used him merely as a pawn; that is, to prove something. They have suggested a thousand irrelevant things. At times they have almost seemed to forget their purpose. In any true comedy man is a small figure dancing against the

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

sky—temporal antics on a background of ultimate facts, birth and death and eternity. That is the only joke, and every great writer has perceived it. Not one of them has ever been a mere debater of propositions. No writer ever created a man without suggesting a mystery. The plain man has this in common with Shakespeare: He too is aware of unknown things, makes guesses, and is quite unreasonable. His mysteries begin too soon, but he has them. From merely clever people you might suppose there was no mystery at all. They make things so clear to you.

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

IV

CONVENTIONAL PLAYS

ON seeing a succession of conventional plays I have often blessed my stars that I was not a technical critic of the stage. For months at a time the condition of the American drama is such that it would seem desirable for any grown-up, serious man to drop the subject altogether. If he went to the theatre during that interval it was simply a frivolous mistake. Surely it is not worth while to express one's self very solemnly about it. That is where the natural man has a great advantage over critics. He may stop talking, if he likes, as soon as his thought ceases, whereas by the strange compulsion of the press they must keep straight on, not only when they prefer not to do so themselves, but when others prefer not to have them. It is a fancied obligation, arising from some sort of a social misunderstanding; and every one is the worse for it. For truthful comment on ordinary books and plays, give me the private monosyllable, the sigh of a

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

personal friend, the look of the latest victim—anything, in fact, but the reluctant fluency of professionals. Not that this miserably didactic group of men are in any sense to blame for it. It should not be forgotten that most dramatic criticism is written by persons who would rather be in bed. It is a thought that disposes one to charity. It is an inhuman system that requires a man to talk like an Act of Congress about every little thing that comes along. Sometimes, like Troilus, in the play, he should be permitted to say: "I cannot fight upon this argument. It is too starved a subject for my sword." Little do we outsiders know of that awful scramble for edifying words on the eve of publication, or those barbarous contracts whereby critics, like hydraulic pumps, are constrained to continuous expression. They account, no doubt, for many things that puzzle us—for the amazing difference between what we see and what we read about, between the living and the writing man. Why this grim little set of duties? Surely one may take his private ease at the play-

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

house without bothering about teaching people what they ought to like or elevating anything. The tastes have no ambassadors, and sometimes the main use of criticism is in showing what manner of man the critic is. An attempt at conversion in this field is an impertinence. It was in the hope that we should remain in some respects unlike that Nature made so many of us and put us up in separate packages. Yet for one man who expresses his own taste we have a hundred missionaries to other people's.

When we simple-minded heathen read the elaborate critical reviews of certain society plays we begin to wonder if there is anything on the stage quite so artificial as this criticism. They are harmless little conventional plays, and every one who sees them knows he is more or less pleasantly wasting his time. No one but a critic with a public duty to perform would dream of looking at them in that solemn way. They vanish upon analysis; they are built on patterns, and not on plots, and nobody either likes or dislikes them for the important reasons the critics give.

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

On the other hand, there are a hundred small matters of vital importance to us which these guardians of public morals and tastes take no account of.

No man, unless he were thinking for publication, would give a moment's reflection to the moral effects of the typically wicked little society play wherein we try to imitate the French from a distance. If he shudders all the way through, it is not a moral shudder. It is only distaste for sheer coarseness. The result of an Anglo-Saxon determination to be French is usually coarseness. Critics confound their repugnance for this kind of thing with moral indignation. It has no higher source than the dislike of celluloid cuffs and large paste diamonds. It is the characteristic of the so-called sinful American play that the devil himself has lost all his devilish graces. Why bother our heads about the morals of an enchantress, in the presence of the cold, hard fact that she does not enchant?

It is one of the ironies of this world that we

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

dislike people most for the qualities they cannot help, and if you were required honestly to select the nine persons whom you would most willingly see hanged, I venture to say that nine entirely blameless lives would be sacrificed. Thence comes it that the admirable objective reasons the critics give for approving or disapproving things on the stage are so unsatisfying. We are the most violent when there is no reason at all, but only a personal distinction. Abstract justice is beyond us, and we may as well frankly admit that we are biased on the subject of every play we have ever seen.

In all things below the range of genius it is foolish to talk in universal terms. Whim is a just enough god for the small matters of every day, and life has large areas of licensed anarchy where truth cannot reach as far as your next-door neighbor. Yet we approach these subjects with a gravity which has always been the angels' greatest joke—the sort of gravity that the Frenchman meant when he called it “a mystery of the body invented to conceal the failings of

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

the soul." We are forever laying down the law where there is no law, and setting up a model when it is the greatest of Heaven's mercies to allow all models to be departed from. We Americans are imaginative in business (where our heart is), but businesslike in our imagination. The aim of American playwrights is to be instantly comprehensible to every member of a miscellaneous crowd, and criticism, which on certain occasions ought to be merely a matter of good-tempered self-revelation, seeks always to establish a constitution and by-laws for the art of pleasing. That is why the unedited American is so much more delightful than his cautious brother with the pen, and why the best things that life has to offer are not yet either printed or staged. But taking it all in all, the critics do not come so near the stage as the stage comes to reality. I can recall several passages in American plays, but not one word of the criticism.

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

V

PRIVATE TASTES AND PRINTED CRITICISM

AFTER reading many pages of dramatic criticism, some of it quite serious and bearing a good French stamp, I am still harassed by doubts as to the limits of the personal equation. Why that air of more than personal certainty? Where is the table of weights and measures by which plays and players are so surely gauged? Many a critic is so sure of his ground that he seems more like a committee framing resolutions than a man writing down what he thinks, and he usually wishes to save or elevate the public, direct, sanctify, and govern it, or hold it on his knee. One of them recently remarked that after laboring in the vineyard for fifteen years without effecting the least improvement in other people's tastes, he had abandoned his didactic mission with a sinking heart. A trained and technical public taster, and yet without a single convert, he now lives as a private person, lonesome but correct. Most critics believe that technical experience gives

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

them a certain authority, and the worst of their worries is the presumption of discordant and haphazard persons like you and me, who feel that there is a broad zone of dramatic matters where it is unsafe for a minute to take the word of another unless we know his birth, breeding, family history, associations in early life, the books he reads, his manners at table, and the sort of wife he enjoys. What is the foot-pound of gentility and where is the trigonometry of grace, and why take a man's word for the charm of the leading lady unless we know the man? It is delightful to express one's views on these points but preposterous for others to accept them. It is pleasant to argue but hideous to convince, and for my part I should loathe a convert in this field the moment I had made him, as a mere tedious duplicate when one of us was enough.

Current criticism seems largely an effort to speak impersonally on purely personal affairs. In a region of licensed disorder people still ask for a rule. So the stage critic becomes a priest of prejudice, a little Moses on a Sinai of whim,

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

absolute where everything is relative, sure of a right way and a wrong way where either way will send you fast asleep, a specialist in things that do not matter, and a moral guide through nonsense where the deadly sins seem silly and the devil feels too depressed to tempt. Nothing on the stage is so far removed from human nature as the things we read about it, and the world is not a whit more pompous behind footlights than it is when it takes up its pen. That is why I pause here in a paroxysm of humility to remark that any commentary of mine is not true for any other person under the sun but reports things as they seem exclusively to my round and artless eyes, that I mean to be a mother to no man, that *sic vos non vobis* is no motto for me but for sheep, bees, pedagogues, and preachers, the Emperor William, the evening newspaper, and the United States Supreme Court.

Principles may be had for the asking, but in spite of the large population of this planet men and women remain to-day the most inaccessible things on it. Plays may be true to every drama-

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

tic principle, run like clockwork, have a good idea behind them, fit the audience like an old coat, lack nothing in short that you could give a name to. The playwright may be so clever that you can suggest in him no possible improvement except that he be born again. There are dozens of negatively admirable plays and irreproachable playwrights. They lack only the qualities for which there is no formula to make them Shakespeares, every one. It cannot even be explained what makes the difference between such a play as *Whitewashing Julia* by Mr. Jones, and *The Admirable Crichton* by Mr. Barrie. Were I writing its prospectus I could make *Whitewashing Julia* look the better of the two, or at least the more novel. Mr. Jones takes the proverb, The pot calls the kettle black, and by means of it saves Julia from her enemies, but he departs from dramatic usage by leaving us certain that the pot told the truth. The fact that Julia is not whitewashed and that he lets us see her to a final triumph over worse sinners, who are also less attractive, than herself makes the play essentially

'ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

plausible and new. Besides that, it is, as the critics say, "well built," which means that the playwright has graciously supplied every effect with a cause, believing that the human reason in a debased form may still perdure even in a playgoer.

Therein also the play is unusual. Contrast it, for instance, with this excellent example of good, every-day dramatic merchandise, where the main point is whether the situations are amusing and not how they came about: A nice woman divorces a worthless husband and a nice man divorces a worthless wife. It would be cheerful, thinks the playwright, to make the two good ones pair off, so in comes coincidence, like a fairy godmother, and the thing is done. Though at present unaware of each other's identity, it seems that they have known and loved each other long ago—coincidence No. 1. It seems also that the worthless husband of the one has been misconducting himself with the worthless wife of the other—coincidence No. 2. And so from many minor surprises, assumed names, and

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

mistaken identities, there results the typical “comedy of manners,” derived from nothing ever seen outside the theatre, but shrewdly based on long acquaintance with the audience within. No one can say whether it is comedy half-drunk or farce half-sober, and nobody cares, except the clever people who are always waking up at the wrong time. Several critics fretted because the worthless husband shammed fits which they called a low trick for the benefit of the gallery. But there is a gallery, is there not? And it has just as good a right to its fits as the orchestra stalls to their jovial divorces. Something for everybody is the kindly democratic motto of a good market play. If by chance an idiot should stray into the family circle, even he must not be coldly ignored.

On this plane let us make no class distinctions, and above all let us not be invidiously thoughtful. It is the typical comedy; and the typical comedy is the blindman’s bluff of the understanding, and the clever people are the horrid little wretches who peep. If we join in the

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

game let us regard the rules. If we stand apart as public enlighteners, then let us be consistently vigilant. Uproot the platitude wherever found. Crucify the comic weekly papers. Perish the political speech and the afternoon tea and the latest novel and the woman's hat. Let there be a total silence to be broken only by brilliant remarks. "The existing popular drama of the day," says Mr. Bernard Shaw, "is quite out of the question for cultivated people who are accustomed to use their brains." The existing popular anything is also out of the question. In fact, the population itself is no fit company for the clever people. If they ever saw things in their actual relations, what a lot there would be for them to do!

But *Whitewashing Julia* belongs to another class of plays, because it bears traces of the author's effort to set down what is in his own head instead of what he finds ready-made in the heads of his audience. Mr. Jones meant to be artistic. He wished to handle an old theme in a light, graceful, and novel manner. There is,

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

however, no recipe for that manner, and though the dialogue was strewn with his good intentions we did not see any sign of fulfillment. It was as good a play in outline as any presented during the season, and as well acted. Its construction is undeniably good, and the construction of some of Shakespeare's plays is, as critics have often proven, undeniably bad. But Mr. Jones has a heavy English middle-class way with him and if he steps lightly his joints crack. He has no special pleasure in living, but he is grimly determined that you shall think he knows life. He never knew an individual, but he can gather types. Like the blind man in the Bible, he sees men as trees walking; and he has learned their botanical names. With a good point he is a little too emphatic. His amusing things are a little too prolonged. He is the sort of man about whom you feel instinctively, How like he is to everybody else. It is a deep internal little trouble—no one to blame but Mother Nature—a private matter, a mere accident of birth.

The elements of *The Admirable Crichton* are

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

not all amazing. Mr. Barrie merely happened to notice that people have an amusing way of mistaking their luck for their merits, confounding circumstances with native gifts, and caste with personal differences. So he wrecked a half-dozen of them on an island and made new circumstances to make new men not to prove anything that we did not know before, but just for the pleasure of seeing an old truth freshly. It is a series of elementary propositions. Deduct from a pompous old earl what society gives him and there may be only enough of him left to play on an accordeon. Banish the second son of a peer from his environment and he may just barely make of himself an indifferent carpenter. Lady Agatha may be by natural gifts a fish-woman and Lady Mary just clever enough to wait at table, and it may be that the only person whom nature has well endowed is the butler. And should that distinguished household be stranded on a lonely island its members would soon shake down into their natural places, leaving the butler at the top. On this simple and sure foundation

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

there would inevitably rise in that lonely isle a butler-monarchy, wherein the subject class would consist of worn-out lords and useless mistresses, who would be as servile under the new conditions as they were pretentious under the old. Then if suddenly restored to their own community, they would fall at once into their old grooves and despise the butler and try to forget; and the butler being a man of sense would expect to be despised, for he knows them by this time for ordinary people, that is to say, inert, custom-made creatures, who move only as they are pushed. The idea is as common as air, and many social philosophers have made books of it, weighing as much as ten pounds each. If it seems new, that is where the art comes in. The fancy takes its fun with just these familiar things which it carries out into little concrete surprises, proving that human nature has no end, and the world no commonplace. Art has no horror of an old fact, but of an old mind to see it with.

For any artistic enterprise to prosper it must receive a subsidy from on high, and Mr. Barrie

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

starts with an unfair advantage over Mr. Jones. With him "the little gods" coöperated, and so he "found a way." That is the thing that makes the difference—the only thing that really matters—and I defy any man to explain.

These considerations (and a dozen other concrete instances would serve as well or better) should impel critics now and again to lay aside judicial airs and paternal manners and confess that they are quite ignorant of other people's truth, that the best things are always the least definable, that art fails in proportion as we can state its formulas and that the world is a play that would not be worth the seeing if we knew the plot. And when it comes to the conventional drama, the cheese and garlic in the windmill, mere social peanuts and popcorn, his emotions are not very important. They are for the most part harmless little circus feelings which no words in the critical vocabulary seem to fit. And this, as I take it, is a good safe rule for any critic: No matter how many the swans were in his youth, if he would grow old decently he must cul-

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

tivate a friendly willingness toward a widening circle of geese. Otherwise he will become that saddest of barnyard reformers, the crusader against commonplace, and the world will squeak as it turns on its axis, and he may find himself too serious a person even for the angels when he dies.

All of which sounds rather devil-may-care, but it is not. It holds true in larger matters than the present stage. There are things on which we ought all to agree: The Binomial Formula, that kind hearts are more than coronets, the law of diminishing returns, monogamy, the exiguity of American literature, the Ten Commandments, and that Shakespeare is greater than Alexander Pope. There are things in which it is desirable forever to disagree: The meaning of life, the proper way to boil an egg, choosing a wife, which of Shakespeare's plays is the best, and the real reason for disliking Jones and admiring a sunset. No critic whose work has endured ever wished to impose on others the precise hierarchy of his enjoyments. He never was

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

mainly a fisher of men, and if now and then he seems to land some of them body and soul, they are mostly the little ones. John Ruskin, bent on rescue though he was, knew in his heart that he would never have made people think at all if he had not made them think differently. Had he ever met his spiritual twin he would certainly have trumped up some excuse for a fight with him. Every true critic is academic, impressionistic, a hermit, a leader of men, an epicure, a missionary, and at the last analysis a human being more in need of company than disciples. He expounds the law and loves the diversity within the law; writes sometimes for the good of men and sometimes for the fun of it. And if he is not all this, and a good deal more, his books are buried with him. We lesser folks are not to blame if we betray an equal laxity.

Whenever an academic writer reads a book he thinks at once of his duty to man and hunts for a useful lesson. When a phrasemaker reads it, he thinks, Here is my chance for a perfectly stunning stage entrance. One weighs a ton and the

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

other weighs nothing at all. The critics of the chair, prosecutors in literary anatomy, Casaubons, commentators, biologists of books divide the field with the harlequins. Neither class shows any liking for the thing itself. They sweat with purpose and descant on pleasure with a gritting of teeth. Mr. Bernard Shaw would die of shame if caught with a platitude upon him. Professor Junk would die of fear if caught without one. Mr. Shaw, hot on the trail of paradox, will show that Shakespeare never conceived a human character. Professor Junk, author of "Hybridisation of Fiction Forms," classifies all novels by their "central thoughts," counts the nouns in "Paradise Lost," shows how Poe's "Raven" was anticipated twenty centuries ago by Kia Yi, the Chinaman. In a solemn voice they bid you choose, like Hercules at the road-forks. Are you academic? Then you must never smoke your pipe except for what it teaches. Are you "impressionistic"? Then you will never light a pipe when there are Roman candles.

After living for a while among these old der-

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

ricks of the academic world you grow very tired of the uplift. Is there to be no talk among equals? When you meet a man must you immediately heave yourself up alongside and try to hoist him? Pen and ink and a sleepless purpose either to instruct or amaze, vigilant self-omission, the habit of talking down, a close reckoning on the public (how high this sentence will lift it, how much it will be tickled by that), give to our critical writings the look of a steam roller flattening out the angle of variation. A good deal of the work should be transferred to the government at Washington, where it could easily fit in under the Secretary of Agriculture, be attached perhaps to the Bureau of Animal Industry. Leave out the man and the rest is as easy as crop reports. Leave the man in and there is not only the danger of deviation, but of a guilty pleasure in other people's diversity. For in private life we allow ourselves great unconcern and many irrelevances. We are never exclusively gymnasts, wits, anti-imperialists, or crowbars of the higher plane. There is a large region wherein

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

we are glad to see our neighbors going their own way. In private life we insist on having our own latch key and dying a separate death. It is only in print that people are less than their propaganda and that the desire of making a proselyte underlies every word. Print is the only place where men are merely pattern-makers, and where, if you say that patterns are not your sole interest night and day, you are set down as a debauchee, careless how many rascals may escape between your sentences.

But if you cannot guide the public aright, why address it? It is like saying, If you cannot reform a man, why speak to him? Somehow or other, the words must come out and when a man has more to say than people will submit to face to face, it is customary now to print it. Should the day ever come when the world will neither listen nor read, there will still be a roar of soliloquies. Strike us dumb and we shall carve our thoughts upon the trees or tattoo our bodies with them.

PART V

RIGOURS OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION

I

BACCALAUREATE SERMONS

In the month of roses the newspapers are full of unwise quotations from the baccalaureate sermons which have been given in various parts of the country. The quotations are unwise because, when unaided by the voice or presence of the speaker, a random passage from a pulpit oration is apt to seem ineffective. And when you see a dozen such passages in parallel columns, you suffer a little from a sense of uniformity. It would be indelicate to say weariness, for you know those exhorters to be good men and true, and you honor their motives and respect the occasion and the

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

practice. Your doubts have to do with the style of the address and that only. It is the extreme usualness of this style that is most striking. To be sure, the speakers are addressing the same class of men on the same sort of an occasion, and you would not expect any great variations in essentials. Nor is a usual style necessarily a bad style. Witness the liturgies. Still there is a limit beyond which the same phrase or turn of thought will not serve, in spite of the vast store of moral earnestness behind it.

Now the graduates addressed are very young men, and most gloriously blessed with inexperience, but they have as a rule gone far enough in their lives to have made the acquaintance of the obvious. There are some things which a baccalaureate sermon should take for granted. It is indiscreet, for instance, to tell the young graduates that they stand on the threshold of life in the presence of golden opportunities. The truth of that statement is unimpeachable, but the time has now come when it should be conveyed in some other way. It can never reach any human mind

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

in its original package. Besides, there is no risk in assuming that the young graduate knows he is standing on the threshold of life or is in a fair way to guess at it. Youth is very simple and beautiful, but the mind is not a virgin forest even at twenty-one. And the "moral uplift" parts of the baccalaureate sermon are in especial need of revision. The "battle of life" should be approached with caution by the speaker as well as by the graduate. When he turns solemnly on him and makes his voice shake and says, "Young man, gird on the armor of righteousness and go forth. Go forward and not back; up and not down; choose the better instead of the worse; aim high and not low," there is no young man's mind within range. Moral uplift is a splendid thing, but this particular derrick is worn out. That is all.

A common feature of baccalaureate sermons is the advice to go forth and purify politics. It is rarely any more specific than this. Carry high ideals into public life and purge away iniquity. Is there a young man living who does not know

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

he ought to do it? They would wake up with a start if the speaker told them how to do it, but he never does. Perhaps it is too much to expect that a man should specify. But he can at least omit the generalities, for they do no good. "Gentlemen of the graduating class," said a baccalaureate speaker, "I sympathize with you in the problems that are facing you. Choose well, choose wisely, choose conscientiously, live under the influence of high ideals. Live, my brothers, an unselfish life." It will never do. It is a case of youth, not of arrested development. There are specific shams to be peeled off and specific lies to be nailed, and they know it. Hackneyism is hackneyism, whether it is the work of saint or sinner, and the effect of it is to put to sleep every particle of truth that it touches.

It should be assumed that a college student knows in a general way that a high moral plane is preferable to a low moral plane. If he goes wrong it will not be from ignorance of this broad truth. When he steps across the threshold he is not likely to meet any one who will tell him in so

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

many words that the low ideal is the better. Every one is most deferential to the high moral principle. In politics he will find purifiers everywhere. So long as he confines himself to the general principle he will have the whole world with him. In "the battle of life" both sides have the same moral war whoop. That is a troublesome point about which baccalaureate sermons are not explicit.

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

II

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FRESHMEN

Now THAT September has come again freshmen are the fruit in season, and the colleges throughout the land are fast gathering in the crop. Within the next few days the returns will all be in and the seven hundred and ninety odd institutions that divide the harvest will be drawing lessons of hope or discouragement from their respective shares. Meanwhile the palpitating freshman takes his last desperate dig at the "horse" quite as if he were not the most coveted of objects. Nor is it likely that you could convince him that he is so yearned after. He is prone rather to believe that he is the victim of a discriminating exclusiveness. Did he know that out of those same seven hundred and ninety odd institutions in these United States a probable two hundred would not have the heart to reject him for anything short of dementia or debauchery, he might take courage. For there is in certain quarters a most unappeasable hankering after

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

freshmen, as our commissioner of education well knows. Freshmen must be had on any terms. With a falling off in freshmen down goes the pulse of the institution, down go the president's reputation and the treasurer's receipts and the professor's salaries, and the alumni's hopes and about everything else that it is the purpose of the institution to keep up. This being so, is it not better that the bars at the entrance should go down instead? Thus reason a fair number of the seven hundred and ninety at the behest of self-preservation in the stress of competition.

Does the rejected and discomfited freshman think nobody loves him? Let him listen to this: "One of the most discouraging features in our system of higher education is the lack of any definite, or, in fact, in a large number of states, the lack of any requirements or conditions exacted of institutions when authorized to confer degrees." It is our commissioner of education who says it. He calls it discouraging. That is his way of looking at it. When a commissioner of education is discouraged, the unfortunate

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

freshman may come by his own. Discouraging, indeed! It means the warmest and most widespread hospitality to freshmen of every shade of incapacity, a very carnival of licensed flunking. There are scores of colleges that are fairly starving for the sight of them.

So those apparently irrelevant figures showing the size of the freshman class as compared with last year and the year before, and the year before that have quite a dramatic import in certain cases. In these cases the criterion of the president's policy is the size of the freshman class. If larger than last year, it is taken to mean the progress of the college, more gifts for dormitories and athletic fields; in other words, physical growth, and that is the only kind of growth that a good many of the seven hundred and ninety really care for. To ask what kind of freshmen they are, whether they are well qualified students or belated children, argues a suspicious mind. In these cases it is taken as the index figure of advancing culture. It is the result of a well-planned and well-advertised campaign for fresh-

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

men; and if the beaming president can rise at the alumni dinner and report the number bigger than last year, there is joy intense and men will tell you he is a "hustler and no mistake." And under present conditions to be pronounced a "hustler" by members of the alumni is for certain of our college presidents not merely a matter of pride and pleasure but a *sine quâ non* of their official life.

He is a familiar figure, this educational "hustler." You will find him in the last report of the Commissioner of Education slightly exaggerating the figures of attendance for his own particular university. You will see him again in the newspapers next summer when extracts from the baccalaureate addresses begin to trickle in. "Young men, you are standing on the threshold. Go forward and not back." That is he, gentlemen of the alumni, and you will meet him at your annual dinner, where he will urge you to "keep in touch" with university ideals, and congratulate you on the completion of the new grand stand and on the size of the entering class. Great

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

things have happened under him—an era of expansion, he will say—as you can see from any recent catalogue. Twice as many students as last year and half as much Latin and Greek, and but for him there would be no summer school of horseshoeing, no butter class or dental department, no marble natatorium, brownstone dormitory, fish-hatchery or cremation plant. It was he who said the other day that the university should aim at nothing but the training of specialists. On no other plan can the university grow big so fast, and rapid bigness is of course the key to him and the key to educational progress—the football key—and why the trustees keep him and the papers print him and the millionaires endow him, and the faculty waits for a chance to prick him, which sometimes comes. Then down he goes, but not for long. It is a land of blessed chances with many things waiting for expansion. Out of nearly eight hundred universities surely some would like to swell. And the *popularis aura* is always blowing somewhere (and is especially fresh upon the prairies) and to all punctured and

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

deflated "hustlers" democracy is kind. He will rise again if only to run for Congress.

All of which contains a moral for any one that wants it. The freshman crop *per se* has no more to do with the higher education than the water-melon or the pumpkin crop. In the case of a well-established college, able to hold to its standards through thick and thin, a large freshman class is a hopeful sign for the college and the community and the freshmen. But wherever the big class is due to methods appropriate to the exploitation of certain brands of soap or cigarettes there is no comfort in it at all. It is a mere rallying of customers and can be done any time by marking down the goods. The commercial test applied to things of the spirit does not hold, and a boom in freshmen taken by itself is sadly ambiguous. For the freshman, like truth and good fortune and human happiness, is altogether a relative matter.

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

III

THE COEDUCATION SCARE

PROTESTS of certain college students against the spread of coeducation have for some reason aroused very little sympathy outside those institutions, and there has not been a single serious attempt to rescue those beleaguered young men. It is no longer possible to stir people up about this matter. If it means that the male sex is going to be dashed to pieces, it cannot be helped. The great majority of American men are fatalists in all that regards the woman's movement. They have no sex-patriotism, and they feel nothing but an idle curiosity when they see a brother struggling against odds. Such of our universities as have let young women in must take the consequences. Whether the men organize and fight, or take to the woods, or stay and fraternize with the enemy to the eternal undoing of their manly characters, makes not the slightest difference to the community at large. Things have come to such a pass that not one of us would lift

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

a finger on their behalf. It was not so very long ago that a good many of us were seriously alarmed. What has so brutalized us?

Recently, when a university professor began to bleat most piteously over the danger to his manliness from the fact that there were so many women near him, the comments of the press were not only unsympathetic; they were actually derisive. Their general tone was, Let his virility go. Who cares? It sounds unfeeling, but it fairly expresses the views of most people toward this side of the coeducation question to-day. No one wants to see the undergraduate courses of all men's or women's colleges thrown open to both sexes, but in those which are already co-educational the male students will never touch our hard hearts by referring to their endangered manhood. You cannot make a man by hiding him from women; and supposing you did succeed in keeping a small flame of manly vigor in him, what good would it do? As soon as you let him go, along would come some rough and boisterous female and blow it out.

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

This is too hard a life with too many calls on our energies for us to be forever chaperoning our own sex. If a man says he does not want women in the room with him when he recites at a quiz or listens to a lecture, let him plead shyness or savagery, or the decay of college spirit, or anything under the sun except this matter of imperilled manhood. Even if it were frankly said that it was unpleasant to have women outranking the men in scholarship or carrying off the class honors, there would be a better chance of gaining sympathy. Every one can understand the feeling. But you might suppose from certain appeals that as soon as women broke into a college the men all took to piling up fruits and flowers and birds on their hat brims. Damaging as woman is, she is not contagious. And sooner or later she must be encountered as she steams along. It may be a good thing for the male to see the woman's movement at close range when he is very young, so that he will become used to it—like a colt to a railway train. For life has no

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

safeguards in this matter, and the world is not adjusted to its softest denizens.

It is these considerations mainly that have made us so indifferent toward those of our brothers who are afraid of becoming our sisters. Of this much we may be certain: The true conservative is not the man whose teeth take to chattering at every change. And as to the danger of feminization either in college or out, there are a thousand and one worse things to worry over. The system will never be given up out of regard for the jeopardized male. The important thing is its effect on the women themselves, but that is another story.

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

IV

THE TRAINED WOMAN

“No longer a debatable question,” said the new president of a woman’s college in an inaugural address on the propriety of a college education for women. Nevertheless they were debating it. Indeed only a short time before a writer on the womanly woman had inquired fiercely, “Are women to be flowers or vegetables?” and for months afterwards had his eye on the sex, bursting out in print at short intervals. Is woman growing gentler, sweeter? he kept asking, Or will she spoil on our hands? He watched her as if she were a watermelon. And even now, debatable or not, a debate is going on somewhere at every hour of the day or night. Still most of us have quieted down, believing that thought is not intrinsically bad for women though it may seem at present a trifle bizarre. The only trouble with college women is their pioneering air. It seems queer that such a commonplace thing as a college education should confer any sense of intellectual at-

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

tainment, but there are still some strange beings with whom the consciousness of graduation endures through life. As well expect Stanley to forget that he had been to Africa. But this is fast diminishing, and soon a girl will be able to go to college without the risk of thinking that she is doing anything remarkable. That sense of being remarkable when she really was not is what did the mischief a few years ago.

The issue between peach-bloom and the higher education does not seem vitally important when we look back on it now. Either extreme was disagreeable, but taking them all in all there was not much choice between the portentous new woman and the fussy old man—the sort of man who trembled for the peach-bloom every time a woman left her house, and piped away at the sad old warning, No charm, no husband. It must have been exasperating to a woman to hear his constant, "Steady there, not too rough. Be sweet if you would be married," when she was doing nothing worse than working for a baccalaureate degree, one of the most moderate of human

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

achievements. The man who urged women to be flowers, not vegetables, feared for some reason a reversion to the feminine type of ancient Gaul, and quoted Motley's description as showing how hard it must be to manage her, "especially when she begins gnashing her teeth, her neck swollen, brandishing her vast and snowy arms, and kicking with her heels, to deliver her fisticuffs, like bolts from the twisted strings of a catapult." Women of this sort, he said, "are never womanly, and certainly not delightfully feminine." It was a voluminous body of writing, and as serious as anything we ever had. There was a cartography of woman's sphere and a metric system for feminine charm and a lot of men were doing picket duty on the frontiers of their own sex for fear women would steal their beards; and whenever an old dry twig of a convention snapped they said it was the breaking down of nature's wall. It carried the "problem" into places where it did not belong, and by meeting absurdity with absurdity encouraged the queer leaders of the "movement" to be queerer yet, and meanwhile it

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

would have had us all huddled together in mortal dread of an irruption of unsexed giantesses.

Since then most of these timid protestants have perished, crushed to death by their huge wives, some say (and I hope it is true), and the prevailing mood nowadays is not only acquiescent but patronizing.

Under cultivation, they will say, women often show uncommon presence of mind and sagacity. Feats of this nature are recorded with great care in the leading periodicals as proof that the experiment was worth making. The following is not only typical of its class, but is so significant in itself that I must present it at some length. Two trained women were talking about the continuous advancement of a mutual friend, when one of them remarked that the reason why she succeeded was "because she is always prepared for emergencies however great——"

"Or small," I added.

"You are thinking of the magnet," was the quick reply.

"The magnet?" I questioned.

"Yes," my acquaintance explained. "One day

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

at college, one of the other girls dropped her eye-glasses in a narrow opening between two walls. She couldn't reach them, and had very nearly decided that they must remain permanently out of reach."

"But they didn't?" I asked with interest.

"No," answered my acquaintance. "Our successful friend happened to remember that their frame was made of steel. She went to the physical laboratory, borrowed a magnet, tied a string to it, and lowering it carefully into the opening, gravely drew up the eye-glasses."

Happily, this delicious story was recounted to me before, in the course of my investigation, I had visited any colleges. At each one of the many girls' colleges in all parts of the country to which I went during the winter and spring, I repeated it to some person connected with the particular institution; and invariably that person exclaimed, "How exactly like a college girl!"

The significant thing, of course, is the writer's surprise at it, and this undercurrent of cynical astonishment runs all through that large and peculiar portion of the press which is devoted to women's interests. Groups of women who unaided have earned enough to pay their board, who can support themselves by their pen, who have weathered education without loss of good

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

looks, who have sat on platforms, but are now sitting in charming homes, who hold offices in clubs, successful mothers, and efficient wives, who can write novels nevertheless, women who have led "the literary life" and still are by no means shattered, form a necessary part of any illustrated periodical. It would seem that intelligence had never come to beings who less expected it. How must they have rated themselves in the past? When a woman achieves anything nowadays, the others seem to write of her as if she were a gorilla eating with a spoon. Yet I could tell tales of cunning far ahead of the anecdote above quoted—deeds of the barbarous and untrained, deeds of the woman with pins between her teeth, deeds of any woman, things done with a man, with a hat, with an income, with no income, proving that if this college girl was remarkable, the doings of every other girl are almost incredible. It is held, and rightly held, that this useful friend to man should be educated, but that is no reason for disparaging what nature had already done all by herself. Sex patriots should remem-

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

ber that even at the very start she was human, cephalic index 77 to 88, cranial capacity considerable, mistress of herself, and feeling more or less at home with the law of gravitation.

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

V

EDUCATIONAL EMOTIONS

THE discussion of educational topics in the press presents some interesting contrasts. Here, for example, are two college presidents who simultaneously express their views as to the present state of the higher education in this country. One sees nothing but progress and the other nothing but decline, and each makes out a pretty good case for his own temperament. Toward the close of the last century, says the buoyant one, there were only nine colleges, and now we can scarcely count them. Though some of them are small, "most of them are eager and enthusiastic to serve humanity." There are fifteen million students in school and college and half a million teachers. Millions upon millions of dollars are spent each year in education. Studies are now pursued that were never heard of in the old times. Everywhere you turn there is something to glory in, and the "bare recitals of the barest facts are full of meaning." Put in your thumb and pull

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

out a plumb and spend the rest of your days in hurrahing. The other man soon puts a stop to that. Things are worse than ever, he says. College education is on the wrong track and only breeds athletes and spendthrifts. Literary ambitions are no longer entertained. "Academic distinction has become a matter of brawn and bulldog courage rather than Greek and calculus." "Harvard freshmen cannot write English, and every college president meditates an article on the growing illiteracy of the college student." "You can hardly pick up a paper without finding items headed 'College Ruffianism,' 'Academic Sluggers,' etc." "College luxury is parasitic and non-educational." "The undergraduate who cannot be made to pay for good instruction is lodged like a prince, indulges in expensive pleasures and wastes far more than would suffice to give his instructor the livelihood which he deserves." In the meanwhile, "the full professor in a New York State college gets an average salary equal to that of a railroad engineer; an assistant professor the same as a fireman, while

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

an instructor is rewarded equally with a brakeman."

The greater part of what has been published on educational subjects for some time past is of this character, and we outsiders who would like to get at the truth are having a bad time of it. But this much we know: Whatever the system may be, if it is responsible for making men talk like this there is something the matter with it. There is little to choose between these two views. It is not good for a generation's health to think too much about its enormous strides. For whose sake are we advertising? The educator is apt to catch this trick from the writer on industrial progress. He counts up heads as if they were steel rails for export, and computes the cost of plant to tickle us with the sound of millions. While under his spell we forget that it makes the least difference what kind of heads they are or what they are filled with. A larger entering class than ever before, gentlemen of the alumni, and a new endowment for the swimming tank, to be known as the John Henry Jones swimming

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

task. What can these preoccupied persons do for education? They lead nowhere. They are behind with the band reporting progress on a big trombone. If there were a dead silence on these points for the next ten years the higher education would not slow up in the least. There are other ways of growing than of growing fat, and the over-emphasis on mere size has been carried to absurd lengths.

But if wealth and numbers are no fair test in this matter of outdoing ancestors, it is just as unwise to spread the belief that we are breeding out into illiterate prize-fighters and luxurious parasites. The questions of college athletics will never be answered by a man who sees items on "College Ruffianism, etc., " in almost every newspaper he takes up, for these items are very rare. It is a strictly personal hallucination. And as for luxury, the man who has money to spend will spend it at college. There is no reason why social differences should stop at the college grounds. We impose no vows of poverty. It is just as well that the college should not be too

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

unlike the world, since the graduate is bound to go there. If we would make it a monastery we should not let him out. And were the universities of sixty years ago so very different? Men had less to spend, but they let fly what they had, and from the sad tales of Oxford which date from that time, did the princeliest kind of things on credit.

Talking along these respective lines is not helpful. It is less the result of thought than of two sets of antithetic emotions. With one class of writers the human being is lost in the machinery. The others merely feel badly and pick out a few things to account for it.

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

VI

INNER CIRCLES

THERE was an inner circle, I understand, within which the late Professor Max Müller was regarded as a very cheap person. Your truly learned man looked on him as an epicure might look on a quick-lunch counter. No doubt his critics have taken the right measure of him. Truth for its own sake was not always the master of his motives. Yet he was to blame not for popularizing but for sometimes popularizing in the wrong way. Inner circles often lose sight of this difference, and throw out a member the minute they catch him meeting the world half way. Huxley is not thought much of in some inner circles, though the stimulus he gave probably did more for science in the long run than the labors of the very inmost and least intelligent drudge that ever snubbed a layman. It is well enough to distrust the general run of popularizers—the men who no sooner learn a commonplace of

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

science than they dilute it and pass it around—but to taboo a man merely because he has a word for us outsiders is hardly fair. People who have had anything to do with inner circles know them to be beset with awful spiritual dangers, of which a certain unworldly snobbery is not the least. “Here’s to Mathematics; may she never be prostituted to any human use.” Shall a man dig all his days and still be in plain sight of the crowd? It is not for the like of us to hobnob with a scientist on the surface. It is enough to stand reverently at the mouth of the hole and know that Professor So-and-so went down thirty years ago and has never since been seen, or at most put an ear to the ground on the chance of hearing him root. It may be a necessary isolation, but sometimes it is not. That is the dark side of this question of the inner circle.

There are degrees of technicality, and within certain limits there is a choice. Some of the least important members of the inner circle are the greatest sticklers for exclusiveness. They want to make the *profanum vulgus* scuttle at the sight

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

of them, and if they ever throw a word to a poor ignorant outside body it almost fells him to the earth. A recent writer on criminology, for example, has some common-sense ideas on the subject of Lombroso's criminal type, holding that what Lombroso cited as marks of the criminal temperament were merely characteristics of the race and the social class to which the criminal belongs. But this is how the critic states his conclusion: "Thus each exceptional subject accentuates himself along lines of transmissible race eccentricities to which he alone proves true, and not to any exceptionally vague physio-psychological archetype." An enterprising sociologist will take the simplest kind of a notion, and so pile on the socio-politico, psycho-physico, zoö-biologico, pseudo-scientific adjectives that no one will dare look for it. Scientific terms there must be, but why use them in speaking of familiar matters for which plain words will do as well? Whenever you can turn one of these tremendous socio-bio-psychical passages back into simple phrases without sacrificing the sense, it is a

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

pretty sure sign that science is not to blame for it, but the vices of the inner circle. To give another illustration from the science of criminology. Historical criminology, the writer tells us, "is bio-zoölogical in inception and detail, and historical as to data and outline, allying itself with predisposing causes inherent in the race and linking itself with primal conditions through a long chain of antecedent biological and anthropological sequences, following the well-known law of homogeneous to heterogeneous, but with ever-increasing distinctness."

It is not science that makes a man write like this. It is the *hauteur* of the inner circle. The thought does not come to him in that way, and there is not the least need of these terrible words. Science puts up no barriers of preciousity. It is not the object of science that thought should baffle its pursuers, even though these pursuers be of low degree. It is the same old thing that Shakespeare and Molière used to joke about. We hear little of it now, chiefly because there are no Shakespeares or Molières to see the difference

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

between truth for truth's sake and technicality for the sake of the inner circle. It would do no harm if members of an inner circle were a little more tactful in dealing with the outsider. There are times when common humanity requires that a tomato shall be called a tomato, and not a *Lycopersicum esculentum*. That is all we mean, and it is no insult to science to say so. Mr. Darwin acted on that principle without losing caste. To that extent he was a popularizer, though he was as far removed from Professor Max Müller as he was from the snobs of the arcanum or the ordinary young Eleusinian dude.

Not to breathe a word against those good men who have worked so hard and specialized so long that they have forgotten the language. They have planted telegraph stations on the frontiers of science, but the wires are down and they can only make signs to their brethren. That is a matter of natural limitations, not of professional pedantry. But inner circles abound in euphuists who use words as if they were insignia of rank, queer little masters of ceremonies and court eti-

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

quette whose services to science are not worth the price of their humanity. They should take a course in Mother Goose. Bigger men than they have been quite generally understood. The native idiom is worth any man's while, and it is a mistake to assume that it is intended for liars alone. As to the popularizer, a democracy must have him; but any neo-bio-psychical person who has never sinned against simplicity is entitled to throw the first stone.

PART VI

ON CERTAIN FORMS OF
PEDANTRY

I

THE DRIER CRITICISM

THERE is a certain unfortunate class of persons who, whenever a new novel of any importance comes out, must fall to and examine it for germs and seeds and variations, and classify it according to purpose, structure and philosophic trend. Five or six of them broke out all at once not long ago, some of them writing books and others magazine articles. As a usual thing they have a theory of development to prove. One of them will tell you the exact relation between the modern novel and the mediæval fabliaux, on what date the novel of purpose started, and how romanti-

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

cism and realism alternately rose and fell. Another proves by a hundred instances that the development of the novel follows the usual law of human expression, proceeding from the simple to the complex, the physical and external to the spiritual and invisible. A third says the whole thing is a department of biology, and is very enthusiastic about the study of hybridization and "that blending of slightly divergent individualities which takes place whenever a new generation is launched." By these means, he says, you can explain Landor, Heine and Rossetti. Fancy leaving those three men unexplained. A fourth, who, though a woman, is made of the same stern stuff, has studied a thousand novels in which the story is told in the first person—"I-novels" she calls them, on the authority of Spielhagen's *Ich-Roman*—and is thus able to make some perfectly trustworthy generalizations. Her conclusion is that the structural importance of the narrator is a most noteworthy characteristic of the I-novel.

This is what is known as the objective or scientific literary criticism. The dryness of it is

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

the dry light of truth. No ordinary man dare question the facts or principles that it sets forth, for the learning and industry that go to make it are beyond all doubt. But there is one thing about it that must strike any one who now and then takes pleasure in a book. These people lose a good deal of fun. Perhaps they were never the kind of people to have fun; but if they started with a capacity for it it certainly is all gone now. Books to them are not the means of enjoyment as we understand the term. They are just so much material to tabulate and classify. A new book, if it is good for anything, is merely a new job, and they are overworked already. They cannot simply read it, but must wearily inquire (1) "What relation does it bear to other forms of human expression?" (2) "What are its specific claims to eminence?" and (3) "What tendencies does it markedly reveal?" Where we common folk may go a-fishing they have to hold some kind of an ichthyological inquest. I do not mean that the scientific interest necessarily shuts out the other kind. Some men are

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

big enough for both. But it happens that a good many of these scientific novel readers are not.

You cannot attribute it altogether to the method. If a man's work leaves him with no more bowels than a logarithm it is likely he was not very well endowed at the start. Taine chased theories of development and betrayed the scientific motive in many ways. Yet his writings bore on them the distinctive marks of an individual mind. He had enthusiasm, prejudices and other human flaws. He caught the spirit of what he wrote about, and he was ten times as literary as he was biological. So he wrote literary criticism. You need not be an expert in structure, descent and hybridization to be a judge of books any more than you need be an anthropologist to be a judge of human nature. In the school of drier criticism anything like a pleasant intimacy with a book is unknown. It is as if one should come near enough to his friends only to ascertain what their facial angles were and whether they were dolichocephalic. And when you think over the books you like you will find that what these

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

scholiasts note in them are precisely the things that do not count. They are pleased (if we may apply the term pleasure to their scholarly emotion) by the resemblances, while it is the unlikenesses that fascinate you, unless, perhaps, you mean to make your doctor's degree by a dissertation on the structural unity of the *Ich-Roman*. Yet it is a safe bit of practical advice to any man that if he has in his possession a book whose elements can all be thoroughly classified and traced to their sources he should at once burn it.

How does it happen that these men are on such formal, even strained relations with literature? Perhaps there was a time when they liked it, but they had to teach it or show their knowledge of it, and a grim pedagogical sense of duty now drives them to their task. They bother with no element of it which they cannot thoroughly explain. It is only the obvious that they are after. They are bound forever to the abominable drudgery of establishing an inductive basis for the well known. And literary criticism is not literary at all. It is compounded of science and system and evolution and ennui.

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

II

PAINSTAKING ILLITERACY

WE are careless enough in our use of words, Heaven knows, but the efforts of a recent writer to set us right only make us hug our sins the tighter. He is a sarcastic person who is alternately amused and dismayed by the slips of other people. Here are some of the things that he considers slips. Speaking of someone who used a wrong word on a certain occasion, he says: "The incident occurred in a 'suburbs' of a large Pennsylvania city, but the people out there are calling it a 'suburb' yet." Again, on running across the expression "a case of horse sense" in a newspaper, he said he tried "to think of some *instance* where horse sense had ever been put up in a crate, box or other package that is usually understood to be a 'case.'" Another newspaper said something about the responsibility of editors in the *conduct* of their journals. Their *conduct* would be improved, he thought, if the editors "were more cautious in *conduct-ing* them." "The

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

government of the tongue" was another expression that puzzled him, but after reading down the page he found that the author referred to the "*govern-ing*" of the tongue. In conclusion, he says he has a notebook full of similar instances.

There is no need of mentioning the man's name. He bore traces of respectability, and may have been already punished enough by a returning sense of shame. But could anything be worse? "Suburb" has been in good standing for hundreds of years before and since Milton wrote of "the suburb of their straw-built citadel." The pedant cannot forget his Latin primer and that "s" in "*urbs.*" The race has chosen to forget. The race is always doing things to shock the pedant. As to "conduct" and "case," you would not suppose the long-established ambiguities of those two words could come as a surprise to any one. But here is an instance of it, and it finds its way into print. Suddenly it dawns on this man that "conduct" sometimes means something besides behavior, and that "case" does not always

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

refer to a packing box. He is ready at any time to crush a lawyer who speaks of his "conduct of a case" with a satirical inquiry as to whether he has in mind the demeanor of twenty-four bottles of beer. And why not "government of the tongue" as well as "government of colonial dependencies," or anything else? It would be absurd to say anything about this foolish matter if it did not represent the attitude of a rather formidable class of persons. The fine flagrancy of this particular instance is, to be sure, somewhat exceptional in print, unless it be among the letters to the editor. But it is not at all unusual in conversation. In fact, nothing speaks so well for the kindly forbearance of the race as the number of these people and the large proportion of them that die natural deaths.

If in talking with a man like this you said something about a "standpoint," he would ask you if you meant a "point of view." If you asked, "Is to-morrow Tuesday?" he would say, "To-morrow *will be* Tuesday." Some members of his family would probably pronounce "pretty"

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

to rhyme with “petty.” All would no doubt take infinite pains to make “tyoors” of all their “tures,” and if any of them were colloquial enough to say, “Don’t you know,” the “t” in “don’t” would be spat out so earnestly that you would dodge. But “don’t” and “can’t” are concessions to the lax manners of the Anglo-Saxon race. “Do not you” is the thing for true refinement. It is a very gold toothpick of a phrase, a sort of literary pocket comb.

The incorrect pedantries of conversation would fill many volumes. They are not the least among the numerous annoyances of education. For the verbal prig is something of a tyrant, and the triple-plate armor of his self-complacency makes him assassin-proof. There is no convincing him that his is a special case of illiteracy, all the worse for being so deliberately wrought out. His quarrel is with the luxuriance of the language. He hates the liberality of our endowment. The activities of words must be curtailed. They must be disembowelled, salted, skinned and dried. And if we unbend a little in

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

pronunciation or elide our words, as did the Greeks, or fall in with the sanctioned carelessness of the leaders of our race, he is for keeping us in after school. He is a cold-blooded disinheritor of words, an apostle of rigidity and a traitor to the best traditions a people has. The language needs no beadle—not even on the Bowery. Order is not maintained by these trivial restraints. They incite, rather, to open rebellion all along the line.

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

III

THE HAND OF PROVIDENCE

HERE is a thoughtful and apparently pious writer who is disturbed by what he calls the naturalistic method of interpreting history, meaning by this the reference of great historical movements to natural causes. It seems to him that Providence is not receiving his fair share of credit for what has come to pass. "Has the bark of human civilization sailed so swiftly and prosperously without a steersman?" he asks. He instances the Greeks. Suppose they had been placed in Scandinavia or Iceland, "would not their genius have been wholly wasted?" and Rome—placed "just in the precise situation where it had the greatest scope for the exercise of its gifts." Then the timeliness of certain men and things. Philip and Alexander "appeared precisely at the fitting moment in Greek and Macedonian history"; Rome's power developed at exactly the right time, late enough to avoid interfering with the original culture of Greece,

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

early enough to be on hand for the administration of the east; the fall of the eastern empire “was timed with the nicety of clockwork, to take place at the very hour when it could unfailingly give rise” to certain momentous consequences; and race after race were constantly appearing on the stage at the “precise period when they were required.” There is much more to the same effect.

What can a man be thinking of to tax historians or anybody else with remissness in this respect? As if we lacked for human explanation of the plans of Providence! It is about the most copious thing in the language. Our school books on history are full of it, and as to the hand of Providence in current politics, there is hardly an orator who is not versed in this colossal palmistry. If Mr. Bryan had been elected, would there not have been hundreds to show the hand of Providence running through all creation with a Populistic plan? If the better class of historians to-day say less about the hand of Providence than their predecessors it is a thing to be thank-

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

ful for. It argues a becoming modesty and a kindlier view of the intelligence of their readers. The method followed by the writer I have quoted is common enough. Great Britain and Russia, he says, are to be the main channels through which the civilization of Europe is to be spread over most of the world. This was in the plan, and if anything in the past had turned out differently it would have spoilt the whole scheme. Under other conditions England could never have become the powerful state she is. He adds:

“Familiar facts are always liable to be taken as matters of course, and the fact that England is an island is one of these. But if we consider the physical causes which have made the island, we shall perceive how easily everything might have been other than it is. The narrow strait that separates France and England is geologically of recent origin, and it is not, so to speak, a permanent feature. . . . The elevation of the land is very moderate and . . . a slight further depression would leave only a few scattered mountain islets of these kingdoms. Again the situation was exactly the right one. Farther south, off the coast of Spain or north or west in the Atlantic, the history must have been wholly different.”

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

There is no stopping these people when the wondering fit is on them. Providence, to their minds, is always having hairbreadth escapes. Suppose Remus had killed Romulus. Remus, being a different sort of man, might not have founded the city. There would have been no Roman empire, and the face of history would have been changed. The thing is endless. The best way is not to begin, or if there must be speculation about what would have changed the face of history, to do it all up at once by supposing there were no human race at all. Why try and catalogue all the things that did not happen? Surely Providence was no more thoughtful when he made Great Britain of just the right size and shape than when he made men right side up. Yet writers who would never think of marvelling at the beneficent design that kept us from going through life head downwards feel the deepest emotion because the Angles and Saxons did not take ship for Patagonia, and the Greeks were not exposed to a set of influences that would have turned them out Dutchmen. Some writers go

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

almost as deep in this philosophy as their Mother Goose prototype—"if the moon were made of green cheese, and the sea were made of ink." It is almost an automatic philosophy and the least shove makes its wheels go round. For what is it but the proclamation of the present as the product of the past and the damnation of a lot of might-have-beens that you invent yourself?

Besides, it is bad manners to be constantly praising Providence because he knew what he was about. Some things should be taken for granted. It was meant that man should walk, but he need not be forever thanking Heaven for putting legs on him, though these legs are adjusted "with the nicety of clockwork" and are as neat an adaptation of means to end as the appearance of Julius Cæsar just in the nick of time and the planting of the Phœnicians by the seashore. There is no sense in selecting just one set of things to compliment. Nor does the plan need any apologists. And it is a merciful thing that we know less than they do about the plot, since we are bound to read the story. The moon

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

was still there, though the donkey drank it up in the puddle. And it is the same way with the mystery when it has been all cleared up or cut and dried by the people who know about Providence.

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

IV

NOTHING NEW

A YOUNG literary student, rushing bravely along a well-worn path, has referred in a learned essay to the great antiquity of new ideas, quoting, of course, the proverb about the lack of novelty under the sun and citing, like all the rest, his modern instances. What did Darwin do but unfold the thought of the ancient Heraclitus, and what would John Stuart Mill have been without Hippias of Keos? Nietzsche's philosophy came straight from oriental antiquity via Aristotle and Carlyle, and Poe's "Raven" was written twenty centuries ago by Kia Yi, the Chinaman, and Ruskin spoke up for the manual arts because St. Paul was a tentmaker. Every respectable thought, like every valuable trotting horse, has its pedigree. And yet readers still persist in looking for novelty and writers are apparently able to supply it. Why is this? asked the studious writer, the veins on his young brow standing out like whipcords. It is to be explained, he

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

thinks, by the fact that the ideas, though old, are often forgotten. This quest for originality, he concludes, is not a bad thing, and the French critic who called it the “worst disease of our time” was wrong.

Now the ins and outs of this matter do not concern us every-day people at all. It is essentially the collegiate view of literature, and springs from the necessity of saying to young men the sort of things that they could pass an examination in. Passing an examination in the pedigree of the central thoughts of great authors seems a hideous thing to most of us alumni. To be learned in literature is such a different thing from liking it. It is characteristic of these discussions to leave out the one thing we care about; that is, the distinctive, personal marks by which we can tell men apart. “A writer must know how to write. This is in a sense the very first condition of success. But so far as the present discussion is concerned, this phase of the question must be left entirely aside,” etc. And, mercy on us, what remains? Why, a grouping of great central

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

ideas, whereby Darwin looks like the twin brother of Heraclitus and Kia Yi and Poe are indistinguishable, and St. Paul is mixed up with Ruskin, and Plato leads Marie Corelli by the hand. For literary purposes it is better to classify men by their noses than by their great central ideas.

Apply this test of novelty to Tolstoi's message to the American people during the war with Spain. The thoughts on the nationalization of land are Henry George's; the doctrine that property is robbery is Proudhon's; the plea for the socialization of the means of production is an echo of commonplace socialist manifestoes; and every one of these notions is not only familiar but flattened out and dog-eared by thousands of illiterate thumbs. Then there is his reference to the paganization of Christianity, which is fully described in the books, and his appeal to the primitive and uncorrupted Christianity, which is the foundation stone of about every new sect that is started and the substance of more sermons than you could count. Not much would be left of the originality of Tolstoi after a text

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

book of the drier criticism had duly classified his thoughts. Yet somehow he is new enough to startle and true enough to make you forget his errors and impossibilities and the genealogy of his general notion is the last thing you care about. This is for the scholars of the drier criticism, who of all the chapters of inspiration like best the first of Matthew: "And Zorobabel begat Abiud; and Abiud begat Eliakim; and Eliakim begat Azor; and Azor begat Sadoc."

The blessed thing about this world is that, however old the general notions may be, some of the people in it are new, and they have a way of saying and doing things the like of which you would swear you never saw before. And you never did. For no formula ever yet told the whole story, and no man ever yet felt and spoke the truth without creating it, and no work of art that was worth anything could ever help being novel. What a disagreeable job it must be, this classifying of books according to a principle by which you cannot even tell whether they are real books or not. How much of Zola can be found

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

in Zoroaster?—compare the good and evil of Zola's trilogy with Ahriman and Ormuzd. It is a terrible industry. Why not own up that books, like people, do not make friends in this way? Powerfully disagreeable people may have your own general notion, and if a man and his wife stood on precisely the same platform of principle they would be a most wonderful and uncomfortable pair. By the time literature is made ready for the classroom, with all its elements explained, what is left of it? The lecturer has descended upon his subject like the tortoise that the eagle dropped on Æschylus's bald head.

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

V

LITERARY ANALYSIS

AN author, like a bicycle, ought not to be taken to pieces by people that do not understand the business. In a recent paper an American novelist is analyzed by a French critic, and when the thing is done all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put that novelist together again. His most admiring friends would not recognize these colossal sections as fragments of his being. There is a good deal of this kind of analysis going on in the literary journals, and it is sometimes as irritating as certain jointed fishing rods in wet weather. It is a common thing to take some minor literary man and divide him up as neatly as if he were a stick of chewing gum already half cut through with grooves and then give his qualities such big names that when recombined they would build Julius Cæsar. There is a lavishness of language at these times that leaves nothing over against the day when the critic may run across a man of real significance.

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

Besides "virile fascination," the critic finds in this harmless novelist philosophies and trends of thought and social dogmas and *zeitgeists* beyond all count or measure.

Now, the truth is the philosophy of this author, or of any other literary man of equal rank, matters very little, and if we had a label and a pigeon-hole for every section of his intellect we should be none the richer. The great point is how well he knows his art. One reason why literary criticism is so unfruitful in this day is that it insists on grubbing among these irrelevant matters. It does not say of a man, Granting his premises, is the thing well done? but What are his premises? For what great principles does he stand? I have known a poem to be condemned because its political economy was wrong, and a novel to be placed on a pinnacle because its author was a Populist at heart. What has this to do with literary analysis? Chemical analysis would be as much in place. This is the spirit that makes such dreary schoolmen of our critics. They ransack an author for his moral purpose.

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

They rattle off his qualities as a palmist tells your character. They weigh his work by political science, psychology and social economics. They could grade each part of him on the scale of ten like a schoolboy's recitation. And they think this scientific thumbing is literary analysis. The man's power to please, his skill in that curious magic we call art, the only thing that matters, is left out.

There was poor old Ruskin. Suppose we judged him by this standard, what would be left of him? No man could count the blunders that he made. He built on false premises, reasoned like a child, painted as if he were a political economist, taught political economy as if he were a painter. Yet on that cracked and battered instrument of his he somehow managed to play a tune that will sing in men's ears so long as there is leisure left for music. Our Alexandrians know this, too; but a man has to be dead or shelved for many years before they act on it. For living authors they have a different test. They judge them by their creeds or schools or party plat-

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

forms, by anything except their power to write. They would have us believe that it is a matter of supreme importance what Mr. Kipling thinks of England's imperial mission, what are M. Zola's views of heredity, where Mr. Howells stands on social questions, and whether Mrs. Humphry Ward is sound in economics, and they go on analyzing deeper and deeper, like a dog at an empty woodchuck hole. And when it is all said and done we merely learn that in addition to some artistic work that gives us pleasure these writers have produced some text-book matter of an indifferent sort. Some superfluous didactic stuff that we do not much care for has been thrown in, and this is what the analyst fishes out as if it were the one precious thing. Perhaps the authors think so, too, but notoriously they love their worst works best.

A man may be almost crazy and still write well. Some excellent ones have been, in fact, maniacal. He may be the soundest, sanest, best-informed of all his race and fail completely. He may have all the gifts or just this one. Scoun-

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

dreis and saints and sages, sometimes fools, have all contributed to literature. It is with the quality which they have in common that literary analysis is alone concerned. And if you would see a writer at his worst take him when his philosophy is uppermost. The worst thing that M. Zola ever wrote is *Dr. Pascal*, which gave a masterly summing up of his philosophy. The darkest days of Mr. Kipling have been those on which purpose got the better of him. One sleeps most soundly when the social philosopher in Mr. Howells is most wide awake. Yet all this is the special field of current literary analysis. The chief harm it does is in misleading the subject of the analysis. The author is encouraged to chase strange gods. As for the rest of us, if there were nothing more in literature than these men dream of, we should be reading text-books if we read at all.

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

VI

OUTDOOR PEDANTRY

NATURE-LOVERS have found their way into print with rather unusual frequency of late and every little while a reviewer has had to dispose of a dozen volumes or so of their publications all at once. The success of this kind of writing is a healthy sign and ought to be a comfort to the prophets of decay as indicating that there are a few sound spots left in us. A people cannot be far removed from innocence when books of this sort are widely read and when even the daily newspapers drop wars and politics, as they sometimes do, for a wholly irrelevant editorial rhapsody on cock-robin or autumn leaves. The London papers, especially, are given to these rustic interludes. Some time ago one of our magazines gathered up the names of our outdoor writers and published an article on them. It is a good showing so far as numbers are concerned. There are more "rambles" and "bird-notes" than you would ever have supposed, and, if reviewers are

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

to be believed, they are all written in the most charming style. But reviewers are not to be believed. No one ought to take time for many of these books if there are passages of Thoreau which he has not yet learned by heart. These writers are serviceable only when they give information. As interpreters they are of no use. For this business we must still rely on the masters, and how few of them there are! The real gift was imparted to a handful so that we should not be tied to our indoor libraries. Providence ordained that most of their works should fit into a knapsack.

A clergyman goes a-fishing and comes home well browned and ten pounds fatter. So he sits down and writes a book full of trite compliments to nature interspersed with a good deal of self-congratulation. He lays claim to the most refined and exquisite emotion you ever heard of—not one particle of which he succeeds in passing along. He says he found “sermons in stones, books in the running brooks” (it is a pity Shakespeare ever wrote the thing), but you get no ink-

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

ling of what they were. And because it is a good sort of thing for a clergyman to do and shows a fine appetite for wholesome fare the critics are absurdly easy on him. "Such a subtle sympathy with nature in her varying moods," they say. How do they know he has it? Just because he swears he has. So they run him in with a dozen others whom they are praising and tell us we must not "neglect the lessons that are to be gained from so charming an assortment of books as have been provided for summer instruction and entertainment." There is no question of the man's sincerity or of the worth of what he writes about, but unfortunately these two are not the only elements of good writing. Here is a beautiful object, and there a genuine admirer. Yet the net result of bringing them together may be merely twaddle so far as a third person is concerned. The critics forget this. All the world loves a lover, but it usually runs away from him when he talks. And so it is with some of the people who make such an ado about nestling in nature's bosom.

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

It is a rare man who can be agreeably articulate in these matters. They are hardly more communicable in speech than music is. Yet there are many who will bully you for not making the attempt or for not being deeply interested in the attempts of others. Some of these books are full of a sort of outdoor snobbishness, an air of having an especially fine make of soul and being proud of it. The writer will pity people who do not penetrate this or that of nature's secrets or participate in certain intimate joys. As if a few banalities about a rhododendron were an evidence of spiritual good form! And he will tell you what these things do for him—how they strengthen him and uplift him and keep his heart pure and his mind clear. "I am a part of nature and nature is a part of me. Tear us apart, and nature is robbed and I am ruined." It may be true, but there should be some other evidence than his word for it. It is indelicate to be forever harping on nature's partiality for you. To the open-air pharisee, half the fun of it is in the feeling that there are so few like him.

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

You cannot fancy his enjoying a thing quietly and for itself, but taking notes on each emotion in order to write it up afterward ostentatiously. How much of it is delight in objective nature and how much is satisfaction with the trim little intellectual outfit he surveys her with? Yet if there is one lesson she is supposed to din into every one who comes close enough it is humility.

In England there are signs that in certain highly respectable magazines and newspapers Nature is even worse treated than with us. Apparently they have a staff correspondent whom they never let indoors—a literary bird-dog for whom the house is no place. If they catch him in the office they shoo him out with the broom to flush some small game for the next number. I gather from one of them that “the winter wind, unlike the entrancing night breezes of summer, is one of the few sounds that please even more when listened to indoors than out. . . . It sighs in the chimney, it moans round the walls; it whistles sometimes, at others it roars.” From another I have learned that as a result of the bad

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

weather of the week before the birds were "thoroughly worn out and uncomfortable," and "went to bed an hour before their time," though some of the partridges may have sat up somewhat longer. Some say it is the Englishman's love of nature, and would have you think it spontaneous. It is nothing of the sort. It is a clear case of compulsion. The wretches hate what they write of in nine cases out of ten. You can tell that from their style, and it is a pity they should be so tormented. Why try and squeeze a great, wild, forest joy out of a little cockney heart?

How the sense of obligation in this matter has increased. You could follow Thackeray's fancy in a cab. Dickens, though the sense of locality was as strong in him as in a cat, used nature only to emphasize pathos or punctuate joy. To Bulwer all outdoors was only stage carpentry and paint. Nowadays the least essay or short story must be trimmed with conventionalized scraps of nature, like a woman's hat. Once if a writer did not wish to do it he did not have to try ; but there is no getting out of it in these days, and the

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

rarest gift of the generations is aped by every one who writes. We, too, have our hypocrites who go and live among the pine trees in order that they may afterward lie about the thoughts they had there—Fourteenth Street imaginations struggling with the great north woods. But venal Yankees though we are, we have not yet established outdoor clerkships like these British magazines. To be sure, in the pages of most of our novelists the sunrise is a memory of insomnia, and Pan wears a high hat, but the feeling for nature is not so dead in us that we turn her over to regular correspondents for the daily press. As countrymen of Thoreau, it will be some time before we are ready for those weekly letters about the “wren so full of jollity and the redbreast so companionable to man.” Occasionally, perhaps; once a month if we go on sinking; but not once a week, unless we have a crop of geniuses.

For you might as well require a weekly epic or a weekly tragedy in blank verse. There is no middle class in this kind of writing, and no possibility of making over the unfit. Only queer

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

effects come from the attempt, such as those of a serious young romancer of Indiana who described a yellow sunset in terms of custard pie. Better an equal quantity of zoölogy or botany with all the technical terms than this constrained recourse to nature with poetical intent. The man of whom it was written:

Primroses on the river's brim,
Dicotyledons were to him,
And they were nothing more,

was at least honest, and might have done better at natural description than any literary man of merely secondary inspiration. The writers above quoted should, if they behave themselves, be allowed indoors, for that is evidently where their heart is, and not in the highlands a-chasing the deer.

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

VII

A POPULARIZER

THE *Life and Letters* of Huxley show clearly the worry and grief that he caused his friends by pausing so often in the search for truth to spread the knowledge of it. Stick to pure science, dig deeper, let the world alone, and, above all, keep out of rows—that was the spirit of most of their advice to him. But having rather more than his share of human nature, and having also a mind which he justly described as “constructed on the high-pressure tubular-boiler principle,” he kept bobbing up on the surface of the earth to set matters straight there. By thus dividing his time he may have spoiled his chance as a specialist, whose *post mortem* nimbus, I understand, is not apt to last unless the man is sunk in the monograph. They say he will be forgotten because he tried to do two things for truth—first find it and then get it accepted. Had he tried only one thing we might remember him, as long, say, as Charles the Fat or Didius Julianus. But

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

whatever trick time may play on him—and we know very well that some of the silliest names live the longest—it does not seem now as if his friends need have worried so. For the present at least we believe he did as much for the world as the best of them.

In a specialist's heaven he may not have a high seat. Some of the brief biological reviews of the century barely noticed him, and one of them ignores altogether the work with which his name is identified. But measuring greatness by depth of research is not wholly satisfactory, since there are other ways of serving the truth than by digging for it. If a man can popularize without cheapening, if he can find for the law and the cause precisely the words for them, it is hard to see why he should be shut out from the best society in our graveyards. And that was where Huxley's talent lay—not in cutting the truth to fit current demands nor in diluting it, but in stripping it for action that it might the sooner prevail. He was for hurrying things up, and he did hurry them up, perhaps, by a generation. An

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

impatient propounder is sometimes as good for the health of the world as a patient investigator. He believed that the better the cause the better should be the expression of it, so he pegged away till he found the words that would carry it farthest. Thus he became a popularizer, but in a different sense from the type of man who makes little journeys into science in order to peddle what he finds there, different even from the late Max Müller, if we may trust the critics, since that worthy man seems sometimes to have confounded truth with confectionery. But the specialists are very severe, and likely as not they will dock a man's glory for the time he lost in fighting their battles for them. It seems a pity in Huxley's case. It was such a splendid and honorable truancy. He may have served science as well by living among men as if he had spent his whole life among the Labyrinthodonts.

Most popularizers being of the other sort, the whole breed bears a bad name among specialists, as if the knowledge of things must be forever

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

divorced from the ability to say them. Mr. Morley was censured not long ago for writing a readable work on history. It was true and well done, said his critic, but it wasted time that should have been spent in searching for facts. Just how much of the man must be filed away in making the specialist? Huxley or Bagehot, or even Macaulay, is a better example for a democratic age than Dr. Casaubon. For while the learned are gathering their private hoards, a lot of debased coin is circulating. Suppose economic science to-day should find its Huxley. He would carry it as far as the doctrines of Henry George or the Marxists. As much has been done in the last fifty years as in the fifty before them, but Smith and Ricardo and Bastiat and Mill knew how to state it. We have as many good reservoirs of thought, but less irrigation. A man may be a Bryanite with ridiculous impunity ; yet evolution should be no easier to teach than common sense about the currency. For that reason the artistic clubbing that Huxley gave the enemy may place him as high in the world's esteem

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

as if he had stayed in his laboratory, there being a need of the very part he accused himself of playing, that “of something between maid-of-all-work and gladiator-general for Science.”

PART VII

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

I

THE SUMMER EXPERIMENT

THE family will soon be coming back, and there is about an even chance that the head of it will announce her firm determination never to go to that place again. Trying new places is a matter of hazard save for the rich, whose choice is unrestricted, and the fatuous, who are happy anywhere. The rest are likely to blunder in and out of summer places, engaging prison cells in advance and facing dreadful odds in the matter of food. There is naturally a large proportion of failures. The unlucky ones may, as the seasons roll past, exchange discomforts at the seaside for

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

pain among the hills, but while there are degrees of failure, they seldom report anything like a positive success. Wounds heal in the winter and hope springs up again in May, showing itself first in a conviction that there "must be nice places if you only knew," and later in a willingness to believe lies. And the lies gather thick and fast, coming not only from their natural sources, but from people with whom your relations had been of the kindest and from friends whom you had always supposed stanch and true.

Their worst treachery is in that matter of the food. The lies about the people do not matter so much, because as time goes on one learns the ratio of "charming people" to the rest of the population. Buoyant natures find nests of them wherever they go, but experience has chastened most of us into a reasoned calculation of chances and we know how seldom "charming people" are found in coveys, the keenest sportsman being lucky if he can flush two of them in a year. But the hope of good food constantly renews itself. The mind is eager to believe, and the beginning

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

of each season finds us as trustful as a little child. Not a great variety, says the betrayer, but on the whole an excellent table; good, plain, sensible, simple, hearty, wholesome, nourishing things, and plenty of them, at which the castigated pulse gives the same old foolish wallop every year. Good meats and vegetables, fresh eggs and faultless butter, the full *menu* of a fool's paradise, and under the spur of an excited imagination the contract is signed. Shall we never learn the worthlessness of other people's views of food? There is no authoritative body of comment on food. Like all the deeper personal problems of life, you must face it alone. A chance acquaintance is no more fitted to decide for you a question of butter than to pick you out a wife. It is not a matter of absolute merit, but an intimate and personal affair, and the butter which invites him daily for three months may seem to you to breathe a curse. It no more supplies a universal criterion than mother's love, the worst case of butter ever known being no doubt somebody's darling, as you might say.

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

Lying on the one hand, and credulity and a total disregard of personal equations on the other, account for many failures in experimental summering. To be sure, there is Nature, and we admit that the life is more than food and the body than raiment, but even a poet would be better if he had better things inside him—"so might he, standing on this pleasant lea, have glimpses that would make him less forlorn." And the family must take a different view of Nature from either the poet or the woodsman and place a limit on her compensations. If it did not, it would not live to grow up. Hardships go with a wild, free life, hunting grizzlies and the like of that, but the family are doing nothing of the sort. So it seems illogical that they should fare like moose-hunters in the mountain boarding-house or be treated like old salts in the hotel by the sea. They argue with a show of reason that they ought not to be pelted with all the hardships of the wild, free life when they are not leading it. But landlords often reason differently, holding that where Nature does so much for the family

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

less is required of the bill of fare. These are some of the things that sometimes bring back the family after the summer experiment with stern lines showing beneath the tan.

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

II

THE PEOPLE NEXT DOOR

OUTWARDLY you may be on friendly terms with the people next door, but, if the truth were known, you do not think much of them. Their ways may be well enough, but they are not your ways. It is not hatred, far less envy; neither is it contempt exactly. Only you do not understand why they live as they do. You account for some things by the differences in social traditions. They were not brought up as you were—not that they are to blame for that, but certain advantages that you had were denied them. Rude noises come from that house next door that you would not expect from people in their station. There is nothing that so reveals the breeding of the inmates as the noises that come from a house. Laughter late at night, when you want to sleep—how coarse it sounds! That is what the strong writer probably means by ribald laughter. Then there is that young woman who sings. What voices the

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

people next door always have, and what a repertoire of songs! Why do they never try a new one? There must be new songs from time to time within the means of any one, but you never hear them next door. Years after a song is forgotten elsewhere it goes on next door. A popular song never dies. The people next door rescue it after it is hounded off the street and warm it into eternal life. Girls begin on it in their teens and worry it away on into womanhood. Even after they are married off they do not get over it, and when they come home to visit you hear it again—"Eyes so balloo and tender," or whatever it may be. Fancy the kind of people that would let a young woman sing "Eyes so balloo and tender" all through life, even if she wanted to. It must injure her mind.

And so it goes. Everything they do shows just what sort of people they are. Look at the things they hang out in their back yard—and is there ever a day when some of their old traps are not hanging out or standing around there? If your things looked like that you would at

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

least keep them indoors. It is not that they are so old, though for the matter of that you should think they would be afraid of germs, but they were chosen with such monstrously bad taste in the first place. What in the world do people want to furnish a house with things like that for? They must have cost enough, too, and for that amount of money they could have bought—but what is the use of talking? There are distinctions that you never can make people feel.

That cook of theirs you would not have in your house five minutes. It must surely be unsafe to eat what a person like that would cook. A certain degree of neatness is indispensable, and people who were used to things would insist upon it. That is the trouble with the people next door—they are not used to things. It is easy enough to put a stop to certain matters if you take them in hand, such, for instance, as those awful Irish whoops that issue every evening from their kitchen windows. But the people next door do not mind—that is the sum of it—they simply do not mind things that would drive

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

you stark mad. They can sleep through their own hideous noise, eat their own ill-prepared food, put up with anything, just because it is theirs. Content is a good thing and family affection is laudable, but in this particular case each goes too far. It annoys you to think of the narrow basis on which it subsists. What can the wife see in the husband or the husband in the wife, or either of them in those young ones?

Yesterday a correspondent wrote to a newspaper complaining of the carpet beating that went on next door. Hitherto he had thought those people were gentlefolk. He doubts it now. The people next door are always doing things that enable you to "size them up." You size them up ten or fifteen times a day. The women in your family size them up much oftener. That doubt of next-door gentility is universal. It is no accident that brings that kind of people next door to you. It is the working of a mighty social law. You are charitable in the matter. You admit their virtues—that is, the big ones, which nobody uses more than once a year. They are

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

respectable people and well-intentioned. But they always lack one indefinable thing which you have, whatever may be your faults. It is very important. The social plane always slants down toward the people next door. One should not be snobbish about it, but the slant is there, nevertheless, and you cannot help knowing it. If we created a nobility over here the people next door could never get in. If you ever mention these things you do so with the utmost delicacy and you explain over and over again that you do not mean anything against the people. You would not for the world let them know you felt as you do. This is all wasted. This is the land of subjective aristocracy.

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

III

THE CHEERFUL GIVER

THE "economic man," that bloodless hero of scientific fiction, will drop out of sight in a few days, and personal property will be flying about in wild disregard of the ordinary laws of exchange. Christmas must have been a bad time for the old school of economists. It must have struck them as a sort of saturnalia of benevolence, a period of economic anarchy when capital flowed into pendent stockings instead of its most productive channels, and enlightened self-interest was not admitted into decent society. It took the starch out of logic and scandalized some very respectable premises. It was an annual reminder of the world's complexity and the difficulty of putting all humanity into a few neat propositions. Most of this particular group of doctrinaires have since died off, some of them of a broken heart, it is said. The suspension of the economic law of grab and the suspicion that that cheerful philosophy is not always applicable does not

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

trouble us any more. In fact, in our reaction against it, at this season we think it is a virtue to suspend common sense and to treat givers as if they were above all laws of reason. This is a mistake. The superb ethical position of the giver may be abused. The adages in regard to him need revision. That one about looking the gift horse in the mouth makes him careless and sometimes injurious, and the statement that the Lord loves a cheerful giver needs qualification. People will do idiotic things in the cheerfulness kind of way.

The *gaucheries* of givers are very saddening, and say what you will, gratitude is the most practical minded of all the virtues. A few years ago Lord Kitchener gave the queen an iron-gray donkey twelve hands high and with ears a foot long, and the Duchess of Cumberland received from him a like token of regard at the same time, though, as befitted her lower station, her donkey was much smaller than the queen's. Lord Kitchener is a blunt, soldierlike person, and nothing of a ladies' man, and the Soudan is a wretched place

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

to shop in. But there would be no excuse even for him if he were in London within range of feminine counsel and should allow his Christmas good will to take the form of sending donkeys to all the women of his acquaintance. Yet that is just the sort of thing some people are always doing, and we are told that it is a sin not to beam on them afterward. Think of their warm hearts? You can't do it—at least not until your first fine rage is spent. Take the silver-plated ice pitcher abuse for example. It is not very common now, but there was a time when groups of benevolent persons organized behind a man's back and gave him a great gleaming water tank that would yield its contents only to the mighty. Corporate kindness always took the forms of an ice pitcher or a gold-headed cane. No one ever thought of anything else. This was because givers were not taught to think at all. They had only to be cheerful. The recipient did the thinking in these instances—a hard, blighted kind of thinking about the exchange power of ice pitchers and gold-headed canes in general.

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

The golden rule is a false guide in giving. Observe the motto about putting yourself in his place, but in applying this don't project all your peculiar whims into people whom they cannot fit. Here is a man with a penchant for taxidermy, and his way of doing as he would be done by is to give the stuffed carcass of a great golden eagle with wings outspread to a young couple living in a small way in an uptown flat. Out of regard for this cheerful giver it hangs over the centre table, drawing bugs and scaring strangers till gratitude relaxes its grip on the conscience. Then it goes into the junk room. Givers have things too much their own way and receive too delicate consideration. They are bolstered up by partisan proverbs in a belief that they have no responsibilities and can do no wrong. The harm they often work is none the less for the polite concealment of the victims. They can fill a man's house with abominations and secret misery. There are ironies of benevolence beyond all dictates of courtesy or sentiment. Sentiment must not be allowed to wreck the home life. A

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

man is not to be blamed for not wishing to live amid burlesque surroundings, and that is what it would amount to if givers persist in treating him as if he were the curator of a museum or lived in the rotunda of a national capitol. In time there may be text books on the art of giving, but in the meanwhile observe the following proverbs as amended:

- (1) The Lord loveth a cheerful and intelligent giver.
- (2) A gift horse may not be looked in the mouth, but don't lose your temper if he is stabled in the attic.

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

IV

THE SERIOUS WOMAN

If women are really anxious for equal opportunities with men they should not make such terrifying threats as to what they will do when they get them. At an important meeting of the Woman's Society for the Promotion of Political Conversation, not long ago, one of the arguments for coeducation was that under present conditions the average girl is apt to see a halo around the head of a young man with a blond moustache, and that if she were associated with him in classroom work the halo would not be there. This is bad strategy, and yet women are always practising it, whether their aim is coeducation or the right to vote or equality of opportunity in the professions. They always talk as if, when they had gained these things, there was going to be a general searching into man, to detect the creature as he really is and then expose him.

Is this politic? Is a man likely to stir himself

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

in their behalf if by so doing he stands to lose all the safeguards of his self-complacency? This practice of referring to the emancipation time as a sort of judgment day for the other sex is no way to help it on even in half-won fields like co-education. The blond man's halo is no great matter, of course, because blond men are comparatively rare, but it is typical of all sorts of little halos that it would be pleasant to keep. It is not easy to keep them, as things are, and when women begin to look at them in that steely way they will be as rare as the tall white hat.

Cold-blooded remarks like this do more to keep history from opening its woman's page than is commonly supposed. It is a cry of no quarter to a struggling self-esteem, and makes it desperate. It hurts awfully to lose a halo, and if women mean to abolish them they had better say nothing about it.

Then there is the woman's club movement. If there is any man left who is disposed to take a light view of it he should be made to read, as I have done, the official organ of the Cause. It will

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

prove to him at once that this movement is the most serious thing on earth. The most striking feature of it is the immense amount of purpose that a woman must have about her when she joins a club. "What is your aim to be in club life this winter?" asks the editor of the official organ. And here are a few of the questions that each member is supposed to ask herself: "What is the club going to be to me this winter?" "Shall we enter the club to seek and perhaps find an office? To dawdle the time away? To work ourselves to death?" "Or shall we enter our club life once more with the determination to take things calmly and not overwork or overworry in the matter?" It is almost sacramental. Along with intense exaltation of spirit must go perfect self-control. Cool, steady hands are what they need for this grim business—none of your alarm-clock women that buzz for a little and then run down. No man's club ever saw the like of it. Cromwell's Ironsides are the nearest thing to it in history. It is a gigantic but not necessarily a hostile force. "And then let us try to make the

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

average man see the value of the club movement. He will if he does not have to eat too many cheerless dinners and spend too many lonely evenings in consequence of it." Toss a word to the lonely, red-eyed husband now and then.

Finally there is that insistent question, What shall we do about woman? Some of us shirk it from sloth, and others dodge it from cowardice, but there is a grim little band of women that neither flag nor flinch. And there is no end to the number of the problems or their complexity. "There is not space," said one of them, "in the course of this present article to make out a complete list of the problems which woman will help to solve," but she had such a list in mind, and knew that if she once could publish it, it would greatly enhance the value of this already serviceable sex. "Marriage," she said, "is a problem in the solution of which woman must assist," and this was only one among many. "The relatively minor but still most important problems of motherhood are so interwoven with those of fatherhood," she went on, "that the former can-

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

not be solved without a parallel solution of the latter." Up, nevertheless, and at them, as they come out in the magazines. But for us the problem of problems, the question that burns and baffles, the damnably difficult rebus, the great corrosive conundrum is, Why do they talk like this?

What shall we do about woman? Need we do anything just now? The hardest thing about the woman problem is to realize that it exists. Is there any serious danger that she will not succeed as a sex? Apart from this slight risk it would seem in most cases to be a mere human-being problem after all. People are so used to this large, loose language that nothing seems to amaze them, and when a woman exclaims, "Come let us solve motherhood and then expose fatherhood, clearing up the marriage question *en passant*," it is taken as a matter of course. I hold that intrinsically it is supremely queer, and that age cannot wither or custom stale its infinite absurdity. And may the time never come when there will not be a plenty to answer these ques-

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

tions offhand, with the stars all winking above them, and the horizon grinning around them, and underfoot that ancient, ironical planet which loves each new snapshot at its mystery as the best of its little old jokes.

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

V

MUSIC AT MEALS

THESE seems to be an increase in the number of our hotels and restaurants that provide music at meals. Bands are playing where they never played before, and the new places are pretty sure to open with an orchestra. During the past ten years the city's restaurants have prospered exceedingly, but no more than they ought. Whatever may be said of public morals, cooking has certainly advanced, and it has been the ideal form of progress, affecting all ranks; for not only have the best improved, but, what is more important, hundreds once sunk in savagery now show rudiments of art. Hence it happens that the pilgrim may stop by the wayside at unwonted places at far less risk. The zone of edible steaks has widened with the progress of the suns. But the music—that is a more doubtful matter. No one ought to dogmatize about it, but whether the spread of it is for good or evil is a question to be calmly reasoned out.

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

To judge from appearances, the majority of those who eat to music are in no wise embarrassed by this combination of their joys. Soups and sonatas, mutton and nocturnes strike them less as rival candidates for notice than as fellow ministrants to wants. And there is warrant for it among the most musical people in the world, many of whom will absorb the most spiritual music and the largest sausage at the same moment and with perfect ease. But the Germans have nothing to teach us in the art of dining, and it is that, not music, that is in question. For men fall obviously into the two groups of the eaters and the diners. The eater can divide his attention with almost anything at dinner. He can read, write, watch a dog-fight through the window, or foot up his expense account for the week. If he had a nose-bag, like a truckman's horses, he would not at meal time lay down his golf clubs or his pen. It is a mere mechanical process like whittling or folding an umbrella. On the other hand the far smaller class of diners have learned by experience

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

or tradition that it is an independent art, and though they may not practise it proficiently they recognize its existence and respect its rules. The least epicurean among them is hurt by certain incongruities. He does not want his favorite poem with his roast. It is no time for a high spiritual appeal. Charles Lamb went so far as to object even to saying grace at a good dinner, holding that it suited only a meagre or precarious meal. If not a poem, why a musical composition? The more distractingly beautiful it is, the worse it is for the business in hand. It is a ridiculous sort of person that wants much sentiment at meals. Joseph Sedley is the type. All this is on the assumption that the music and the cookery are both good. The man who would serve both masters either closes his ears and eats merely or spills things and half chews, to say nothing of the various accessories of dining which are neglected or botched.

But if the music is bad, which at present is generally the case, then there is no defence save that old one of giving the public what it wants,

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

and this has nothing to do either with morals or with the principles of art. Things have come to a pretty pass if there is to be no more talking at meals. People do it better then than at any other time, and even if they do not do it well you can stand more from them. It could be arranged easily enough, if the restaurants provided one or two muffled or sound-proof rooms. At present the blasts of the band not only dominate every nook and corner, but they have a devilish way of concealing the thing so that you are as likely as not to sit down in its very jaws. Henceforth the intimacies of private conversation must compete with merciless things in rag-time accentuated by a horn, for some restaurants have introduced wind instruments, though as yet there are no drums. These may come in time, along with cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery and dulcimer, if nothing is done.

Not to imply that the combination of music with dining is theoretically impossible, but composers have not had that in view. They have applied their genius to love, war, re-

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

ligion, seafaring and the dance, but as yet there is nothing that can be called distinctively meal music. It comes to us, therefore, replete with other associations which are necessarily out of place. It is as absurd to eat to a war song as to dance to a requiem mass. Simple, unobtrusive meal songs are what we need, a little potato cantata, say, or a fugue that will go with the beans.

PART VIII

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING, AND ITS GLORY

I

LITERARY REPUTATIONS

I ONCE read an article on “Disappearing Authors” chiefly because the title caught me, but to my disappointment I found that the writer had nothing to say beyond a mere expression of wonder at the disappearance of certain authors from the popular view. A genuine attempt to find out why certain once popular authors have disappeared would be most interesting, but there is a line of inquiry which is still better worth while.

Suppose a man of rich literary experience would frankly tell what he knows about the non-

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

disappearance of certain authors who really ought to disappear. How do they keep from disappearing? There's a thing worth knowing. How to make a reputation work for you and pay your coal bills and seat you high in pleasant places where you don't belong; how to create the illusion of importance and keep it up at the least cost—that is a royal art whose secrets are worth digging for. For some reason we moralize about such cases, and, having caught an author at the trick, we feel it our duty to be indignant or at least contemptuous. We take this duty too seriously.

We sneer at a certain type of author because he keeps himself before the public as if he were a soap. But why in the world should he not? Why is it so much worse to work directly on a reputation than to work indirectly for it? We have no right to blame people just because they have not an ascetic ideal and are not bound up in their art, with no grosser earthly wish than a faint hope of some day having a handsome tomb. To take a spindling reputation, and by watering

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

it and spading the roots and killing the bugs on the vines, turn it into a fat garden esculent for the nourishment of yourself and family, is something of a feat. There is no use in affecting to despise it. The man who can do it has a rare skill and a certain hardness of character that appeal to one's respect. They are not literary qualities, but they are mighty in their way, and the rewards are fairly won. To coddle a young reputation is one of the most tiresome and exacting jobs in the whole world. A man with a real fondness for his work will not bother with it. Any one who does bother with it surely earns his pay. Think what it means.

A literary reputation without much to go upon—and that is the kind I have in mind—is the most rickety, balky, ill-balanced thing imaginable. It needs incessant care to keep it from running down or falling over or having holes punched in it by the critics. A man must live with every sense on the stretch for opportunities to advance it. No means are too humble or laborious or remote. Do you suppose it is pleasant

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

always to be delivering addresses on birds before distant kindergartners' meetings or travelling through the middle west of a hot June in order to figure on commencement platforms and address graduating classes on the superiority of high ideals over low ideals? That is a part of the work. So is the reading from your own books and the being interviewed about the influences that made you the man you are, and the committee work, and the secretaryships, and the long talk at the ladies' afternoon club, and the instigation of the paragraph, and the praise of kindly reviewers, and the heading off of critics, and the writing of timely letters to the press, and the admiring of other people's books so that they will admire yours. A man does not do all this for the fun of the thing or for the mere gratification of conceit. It is business—a grim, inexorable business—and precisely the kind that is most irksome to the man of literary tastes. The artist in publicity has no easy time.

Why, then, begrudge him what he earns? There is nothing more unreasonable than the tone

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

of bitterness with which men with some real gift for their calling refer to the successful persons of this class. As well grow angry at the success of a green grocer. Yet from Virgil to Pope, and from Pope to Byron, there is an unbroken chain of sarcasms about these exasperatingly industrious people who have earned good wages and filled unmarked graves. And nowadays it is the commonest thing in the world to hear people say with an aggrieved air, "Look at So-and-so. There is absolutely nothing in him. Yet see how he keeps himself before the public, and see how he gets on." As if the fact that there isn't anything in him didn't make it all the more wonderful and interesting that he should get on. The acrimonious comments upon the methods of Miss Marie Corelli and Mr. Hall Caine and whoever may be their analogues for the moment over here are absurdly out of place. People like that are not toiling for literary ends, and they do not have the pleasure of their craft. To them the dull grind of literary work is never alleviated by the consciousness that the work is good. As a

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

compensation they should be allowed to possess in peace the objects that they seek by such assiduous and irksome methods. The man who likes to write has no quarrel with them. On the other hand, the curious art that these people have mastered is worthy of his dispassionate study.

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

II

THE PRAISE OF MINOR AUTHORS

THE queerest kind of writing we have nowadays is that of the men who burst out every little while and say sweet things about every living American writer they can think of. I have read an account in a magazine of an imaginary journey from Indiana to the gulf, in which the writer pays a compliment to every local colorist on either side of the railway. "I kiss my hand to the whole genial and lovable lot," he says, as he takes leave of some district where the tracks of minor writers are particularly fresh and thick. And here is J. L. Jones's land, and there shines R. B. Smithson's country, and yonder loom the mountains sacred to J. Cox, Jr., and this valley is where W. T. Smiles "blows his flute-tunes." Beyond the sky-line is the home of a magazine, while far to the southward the young author of certain wondrous stories "lives quietly unspoilt by sudden and well-deserved fortune." And "dear Uncle Remus" peeps at him from Atlanta,

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

and S. M. Pike warbles at him from Tuscaloosa, and here is a nest of “low-country geniuses,” and there is where he met a “charming poet” years ago, then “a bright-eyed boy full of dreams and rhymes.” This sort of thing happens, as I said before, every little while. No matter how minute the bard or how imponderable the novelist, his greatness is found out.

Some say it is a kind of bribery, a lie for a lie and a gush for a gush. This theory, like that of most motive-diggers, goes too deep. It is oftener a mere outburst of miscellaneous affection, the writer actually having a heart in which everybody is made welcome like the lobby of an American hotel. And the chances are that he would tell you that he is encouraging literature, as if literary appreciation consisted in swallowing everything whole. Of course there is nothing bad about it, but the American reader is apt to feel as he does when he sees Frenchmen kiss each other. And it is not good for any class of men to have too much of it, even when they like it, least of all writers, who become idiotic under

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

flattery sooner than any other set of people in the world. Probably they do not care so much about it as is generally supposed, for one does not value even a dog if he wags his tail for everybody, and it is the same way with a critic. But it is not a safe practice in the present state of the arts. We see the effects of it in the number of American writers who reach a certain level of attainment and then stop. Why should they go on when there are hundreds telling them that they have reached the top? Should not a writer take it easy when he is already "superb"? There is a long stretch in a writer's career where the momentum of his past successes will carry him along. His muse is coasting, as you might say. That is the time when the critic should do anything to wake him up—throw stones at him and make him pedal. It looks unfeeling, but it is really for his good. There are so many ways of capitalizing a reputation that the temptation to knock off work is almost irresistible. When a man reaches the point at which he can live handsomely by reading from his poems or signing

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

advertisements for soap, gentle treatment will not suffice. The old-fashioned rawhide of Macaulay or Jeffreys may be the only thing that can save him from himself. Mistaken softness, like that of the writer quoted, is bad for us and for them. Sixty-five living American novelists all destined for posterity, said a critic not long ago; hardly a state in the Union without a superb poet, said another; every corner of the country provided with a gifted local colorist, said a third. And each was a respectable, middle-aged person with private preference in the matter of friends, wives, tobacco and a host of other things. It is a strange habit of mind.

There must be a point beyond which the praise of an author cannot go without making him doubt the truth of it or the worth of it. In defiance of many great authorities on human nature I hold that most men do discern a dividing line between appreciation and gush and feel vaguely uncomfortable when that line is passed. The limit may be indefinitely remote, but there is a limit. Present literary usage ignores it alto-

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

gether. It is in thorough accord with this usage that a literary journal will say of a new book that even before opening the covers you may be sure one of the wonders of the world awaits you. "Here will be no blurred or slighted words. . . . Here will be the finest and best of which the author is capable. Nature herself will be here. Here will be supreme artistry of style, little miracles of observation," and so forth. You may parallel it in almost any column of literary comment. It is the way the literary people lay it on nowadays when they like a man. They sometimes do it just because they like his publishers. In this instance the subject happens to be a writer who deserves well of us, but that only makes the matter worse. The intelligence that fits him for the work he does must sharpen his disgust at this absurd overrating of it. It is no compliment to an author to throw away all standards and abrogate all common sense in talking of him, and whatever we may think of literary vanity the most self-esteemed of writers does make distinctions as to the source of praise. He values

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

most the kind that is accompanied by some evidence of a sound mind.

It is probable that sense persists in an author longer than it is supposed to be. I do not share in that low view of authors which is so prevalent in the literary periodicals. It is seldom that an author shows his claws and spits when you stroke him, but it does not follow that he is totally indifferent to the personality of the stroker or to the kind of stroking. That is where he differs from other kinds of pets. A cat would as lief be fondled by an idiot boy if he were good to it. An author would not. This may sound elementary, but it is a fact that is utterly unknown to hundreds of contributors to current literary comment. We sometimes hear the matter discussed from the point of view of the reader who may be disappointed or misled, and may complain that criticism has fallen on evil days. But no one opposes it for the author's sake. He is supposed to be pleased by it. He is a man and a brother, and we have no right to assume that he is not above it. When we write of him as if he were a

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

new make of motor car and we owned stock in the company, it does not always make him happy.

If possible one should rid himself of that cynical view of human nature as always and everywhere at the mercy of the flatterer, however unskilful he may be. Tell any plain friend of yours that his beauty makes you glad and he will lose patience with you. Compliment any cross-eyed girl on her lovely orbs and she will fly out at you. To a certain extent this rule applies to authors, though the limits are more elastic and it is rare that they openly revolt. Here and there an honest author is made to feel very sheepish by those gorgeous offerings of praise. "Supreme artistry of style," "miracles of observation," "rapture," and "pure delight" must give modest merit something of a turn. What is left over for the out-and-out divinities? One should keep a few hosannas for the next world. Authors are not all Bunthornes, and they have some sense of relative values. They know the difference between the critic with a standard of his own and the reviewer whose sole outfit is a vocabu-

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

lary like a billboard. They know it, and many of them suffer under certain kinds of eulogy. But the pity of it is that they suffer in silence. They reply to their critics often enough, but to the men who praise them foolishly they say never a word. If they would burst out on some rapturous appreciator once in a while and shake him in the full public gaze, it would be a good thing all around. It would help to remove some misconceptions.

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

III

THE PHRASEMAKER

AN admirer of M. Emile Faguet quotes a string of his phrases to illustrate his epigrammatic style. Some of them are worth repeating as types of what are sometimes considered sparkling or incisive sayings. Of Gautier, M. Faguet says, "He sets out from nowhere and just there he arrives;" of Voltaire, "The prince of wits became the god of imbeciles;" of Balzac, "He has no wit at all." It is especially hard to see why the last one should have been picked out, but it appears to be highly prized by connoisseurs, and, for that matter, none of them will seem wonderful to the ordinary mind. There is a queer standard for quotable sayings just now among critics, and the simplest sort of statement may turn out to be an epigram. France has always been apt to sacrifice too much to her guilty love of phrases, but of late these phrases seem to have deteriorated like her alcoholic drinks. A couple of phrases still intoxicate a Frenchman, as

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

Chateaubriand complained in his day, but he is content with a cheaper brand. And ever since a knot of English playwrights and authors began some years ago to imitate this trick of Frenchmen at their worst, the phrasemaker has done considerable damage over here. Many honest reviewers have been set gaping by simple little verbal shifts that should be as easy to learn as punctuation. Any writer who turns out a fair number of brief cynical sentences, chiefly about love and marriage, is sure to be pointed out as the possessor of a brilliant style.

Why is it that the phrasemaker so often miserably fails of effect? He is an industrious person, and industry ought to tell here as well as anywhere else. You cannot explain exactly that impression of artificiality, but it is as unmistakable as blondined hair. For one thing, the phrasemaker betrays an undue consciousness of words, which is quite as fatal as an undue consciousness of clothes. When a well-known writer, lecturing on the stage, said that the modern play was a compound of "devil, drivel and snivel,"

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

everybody knew that he worked like a Trojan for that phrase and valued it very highly, and hoped it would be noticed and perhaps envied a little by other phrasemakers who had not said it. For any one who has seen much of phrasemakers knows how they smack their lips over their own good things and how a shade of regret passes over their faces before they give the successful rival his deserved applause. One knows, too, that those airy little cynicisms that are tossed off on the spur of the moment have been hammered out most painfully long before.

But the labor spent on them is not the main thing. It is the fact that something about them lets you know the labor has been spent. You can not cherish any illusion of spontaneity. Yet that is just what one wants to do with a work of art. It may be that a man of real gifts as a writer will toil four days and a night for a fit word; but that does not mean a fit word for his audience, but only for his own idea. This process the phrasemaker exactly inverts. He does not care a rap for the thought or the fact or the real look

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

of the thing he is trying to describe. He will sacrifice any part of it to a phrase that sounds well. So every sentence is a sort of compromise, and never really means all it seems to. He is constantly changing his mental route in order to take in catchy phrases. Then the best half of his mind is always on the public, wondering if this or that thing will not strike them as being pretty good. Worse than that, he stores up in his head a lot of little antithetical jingles or inverted truisms, thinking he will some time use them as impromptus, and he does use them, too, the cold-blooded old humbug.

It is the most insidious vice of the literary temperament, and critics generally do not sufficiently warn people of the danger. Mr. Howells makes one of his heroes jot down his happy phrases in a note book in the hope that they will figure in some future work of his as literary gems. Mr. Barrie makes one of his characters do the same. Neither of these people ended badly, as they ought to have if the writers had been conscientious. They were represented as

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

merely taking a legitimate step in their literary career, and they were fairly successful. It was a bad moral. Outside books they would have become phrasemakers and would have attained no higher place than that which Oliver Wendell Holmes sank to a few times in an otherwise blameless life. What a difference between the phrase-maker and the man whose thought insists on the words and gets them and who has no clot of ink on his brain.

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

IV

THE PURSUIT OF HUMOR

WHILE we Americans can never have too much humor, we can hear too much about it. I once followed a long controversy on the subject in the newspapers, especially on the question whether women ever possess this quality in their own right. It was a very solemn affair and a little tedious. Running through it all was an under-current of irritability, for these people would insist on citing cases in point, and just as soon as any one is rash enough to illustrate what he means by humor all hope of a peaceful discussion is gone. It is a rule alike for man and author never to illustrate in this matter. Disappointment is sure to follow, and sometimes hate. Even George Meredith becomes an object of scorn when he gives us samples of Diana's jokes. A definite promise of humor is always irredeemable. Then there was an extreme jealousy among the disputants lest any one should seem to be claiming more than his share. First one would

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

come out with a scientific definition of it and a general air of mastership. Then another would show him up as an impostor, and in so doing try and give the impression that he had a rather neat turn for it himself. Like all discussions of humor, it was strenuous and was accompanied by the sound of heavy blows.

Now it is the commonest thing in the world to hear people call the absence of a sense of humor the one fatal defect. No matter how owlish a man is, he will tell you that. It is a miserable falsehood, and it does incalculable harm. A life without humor is like a life without legs. You are haunted by a sense of incompleteness, and you cannot go where your friends go. You are also somewhat of a burden. But the only really fatal thing is the shamming of humor when you have it not. We have praised it so much that we have started an insincere cult, and there are many who think they must glorify it when they hate it from the bottom of their hearts. False humor-worship is the deadliest of social sins, and one of the commonest. People without a grain

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

of humor in their composition will eulogize it by the hour. Men will confess to treason, murder, arson, false teeth or a wig. How many of them will own up to a lack of humor? The courage that could draw this confession from a man would atone for everything. No good can come from the mad attempts to define humor, but there might be some advantage in determining how people should behave toward it. The first law is that humor is never overtaken when chased, or propitiated when praised. It is the one valuable thing which it is worth no man's while to work for. If this could only be learned, one of the gloomiest and most nefarious of industries would be banished from the world.

So, whether it is a man or a woman, or a weekly paper or a department of a magazine, the best advice in case of a deliberate attempt in this field is to give it up altogether. No one with any tenderness of heart wants to be the witness of that awful struggle. When the laborers in this vineyard take pains they always give them. That is the unhappy result of these discussions and of

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

our indiscriminate praise. Heavy-footed persons start off in pursuit and the underbrush of light literature is always crashing with the noise of their unwieldy bodies. What is gained by these periodical *battues*? No one ever bags anything, and the frightened little animal is more seldom seen than ever. People should be more cautious in what they say about humor. If there were less said about it there might be more of the thing itself, for the anxious seeker ransacks these discussions for guiding principles and starts grimly off on the trail. He becomes a quasi-humorist with a system. Is there anything worse? In spite of the service which real humor renders, one may honestly doubt whether it offsets the injuries committed in its name. There are people whom nature meant to be solemn from their cradle to their grave. They are under bonds to remain so. In so far as they are true to themselves they are safe company for any one; but outside their proper field they are terrible. Solemnity is relatively a blessing, and the man who was born with it should never be

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

encouraged to wrench himself away. A solemn mind out of joint—that is what happens when the humorous ambition o'erleaps itself. It is the commonest of accidents in this hunting field.

And another rule worth observing is that humor never works well when harnessed to a grudge. A writer tried to put it to this use only the other day. His resolute attempt to make fun of his political enemies took the form of mentioning them one by one and remarking in each case that they were “positively funny.” People often refer to others as “positively funny” when what they really want to do is to garrote them; as if a thing conceived in darkness and shapen in malignity became humor by the invocation of the name. This is worse than the ordinary style of pursuit. It is the press-gang method.

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

V

THE TEMPTATION OF AUTHORS

THE devil does not have to take the author to any mountain top in order to tempt him. It is much simpler. He merely sends around a smooth agent with orders to make a contract with that author on any terms—on no account to come away without the promise of an article or a book. We seldom hear what really goes on at these interviews, but their general results appear plainly enough from the publishers' lists and the files of the magazines. It does not seem as if the successful American author could refuse many jobs. The bulk of what he writes and the nature of the topics he writes on indicate that by the proper means he can be urged to a pretty smart pace in the matter of turning out copy. The beginner always dreams of the blessed day when the publisher will have to seek him, not he the publishers, and he usually pictures himself as repelling many of them with some sternness, for of what use is success if it does not enable you to choose

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

your own time and your own subjects and break away from the odious bondage to the pot-boiler? Obscure merit glows all over at this view of himself repulsing great crowds of publishers and editors with a few trenchant words about his artistic integrity. The chances are he has quite a collection of polite sarcasms stored up against that day—things which would look rather well in print in case the newspapers should report them, as they undoubtedly would, in spite of his reticence about the affair.

But the temptation is too subtle and too many good men have succumbed to it to warrant this high confidence. The constant draining of our well-known authors is one of the saddest things in current literature. Apparently there is no age and no degree of success that is safe from it. You might think that toward the close of a long and honorable literary career a man would feel entitled to the luxury of writing only when and what he pleased. Yet no sooner does he reach that point than he pours out a perfect flood of

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

articles and interviews on subjects that it must bore him to death to think of. You find him dis- coursing in any kind of newspaper or magazine about things that no unfettered human mind would linger on for five minutes. The successful author is like the department store. There is no corner of periodical literature where you do not see his delivery wagon, and there is no end to the variety of goods delivered. Sin, free sil- ver, mother's love and the books that helped him, success, football and the fear of death—any- thing under the sun seems successively to at- tract that serviceable mind. That he really would write on those things if left to himself few are so cynical as to believe. Good authors are not by nature rapid-firing. If they become so, you may be sure somebody has been tampering with them. An author is like a clock. Let an editor fool with him and set him to striking all the hours at once and he is out of order forever afterward.

An enterprising editor once took it into his head that the public would be much interested in

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

reading the answers of a number of persons, each eminent in his line, to the question, What do you fear most? So he arranged a "symposium" of millionaires, dancers, actresses, railway magnates, politicians, authors and other worthies, each of whom contributed an essay or an interview on this subject. Thus the eager public had a chance to compare the fears of the successful politician with the fears of the man who had made his fortune in steel. The author who took part in this brilliant affair—and he was one of the best we have—supplied an essay to the effect that young people feared death more than old people, and that old people feared the loss of money more than young people, and that fear was an attitude of mind that tended to produce cowardice. What did it mean? Merely that something had to be written. No mind, however strong it may have been at the start, can hold out when it is treated like that. A man's whole soul is in danger of being waterlogged when he dilutes his thoughts to that extent.

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

The danger in spreading one's self thin is that the time surely comes when it is done unconsciously. A man thinks it is his thought that is flowing on like that when it is only his ink. There are few people to warn him because there are few that know the difference. People generally do not realize that authors are deliquescent and should be kept in a dry place. Then the temptation to the author assumes such virtuous form. There is thrift, for instance. It is a virtue which we humble folk may safely strive for. But thrift ruins more authors than all the vices put together. As a man he may have as handsome a set of private morals as you ever saw, and yet as an author be going to the dogs at lightning speed. Journeywork does the thing oftener than either opium or absinthe. Can the "muse" fill orders every day? If it does, how does it differ from that despised thing, journalism? That the majority of writers should do this sort of thing implies no waste at all. If they waited all their lives probably nothing better would occur to them. But that the mind of

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

an estimable author should be for rent for every purpose is a wicked and incongruous thing. It is like the chartering of a United States battleship for every clam bake.

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

VI

THE JOURNALIST AND HIS BETTERS

How fond people are of trying to define the boundary between journalism and literature. There is never a time when some writer is not pegging away at it. Failure cannot discourage or reiteration stale, and we may as well expect to see the same thing tried in almost the same language every day for the rest of our lives. In one of the recent attempts the investigator decides that the difference between journalism and literature is that, while journalistic work is done with the expectation that it will soon perish, literary work is done "in the high hope that it might be eternal." This definition has the merit of perfect clearness as well as ease of application by squarely dividing the two according to the self-confidence of the writer. If he is the kind of man who is tolerably sure that he and eternity were made for each other, he is a literary person. If he suspects that the eternal may have no use for him, he is a journalist. Now, there is

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

no use in a newspaper man's trying to debate this matter. He is bound to get the worst of it. It is a reckless thing to stand up against a man who knows he is eternal and all that. Still there are a good many light literary characters who may have some misgivings about their eternity, and these he dares address, though, of course, with deference, for he cannot conceive of anything nearer eternity in his own case than the intervals between stations on the elevated road.

To these literary persons he feels drawn by the consciousness of a common destiny. Apart from the natural enthusiasm of their respective widows, oblivion in each case will set in about four days after death. There are no class distinctions in the land of the forgotten. As between the lumber room and the waste basket there is little choice. But while the doom is precisely the same for the majority of each profession, the newspaper man has this great advantage. He knows what this doom will be, and is ready for it, and be does not waste five minutes of his life in worrying about it one way or the other. At least he is not

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

laying up for himself a disappointed ghosthood, and it is pretty certain that the shades of some exceedingly literary persons will be terribly annoyed by what is going to happen to their works after death. And there is another burden that the newspaper man is free from. He does not have to talk in such a very large way about his work as art, or to feel oppressed with that sense of responsibility for nature's priceless gifts. Being without worries of this kind, he has more chance to meet people on equal and agreeable terms. That is the great thing about being un-literary and uneternal. You do not have any of those dreadfully serious duties toward yourself. You are not obliged to sing psalms to the holy things inside you or to act as if you were a special little ark of the covenant for something that no one but yourself knows the value of. That leaves you leisure and a light heart—a low level, but with its humble joys. A newspaper man does not envy the general run of authors. He would be scared to death by the consciousness of all that talent. Indeed, if he should ever feel inside him

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

what certain literary characters sometimes call their "muse," he would see a doctor and take something for it.

For if there is one thing in the world that would embarrass an honest journalist it is the obligation to exhibit a handsome diction with never a single fact or thought to hang it on—to keep a sort of show window of word millinery as a sign that first-rate literary work is done inside. But people who say they have the "muses" do not seem to mind this sort of thing in the least. Thought is only a clothes-line to them, anyhow. It is not wise for the people who are just across the border to sniff so at the newspaper man, lowly though he be. What is the use in their rigging things out for eternity when they cannot reach the middle of next week? The newspaper man cannot make his words sing, as Stevenson said, but at least he is spared the awkwardness of being the only person who knows that they are singing. And since words will not always sing, why is it not a good plan even in light literature to have an idea or two

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

to fall back upon? And if you have not an idea, find a fact. Literature should not be so light that you do not feel it. Surely there are many authors who are merely journalists of a slower breed. The journalist is not as a rule sensitive, but he does not believe that there is an aristocracy of failure. What has eternity to do with the rank and file of either class?

When the two professions have so much in common it seems foolish to be bothering about boundaries. It would be better to unite against the common enemy of both. There is a kind of man who has no business in either. He is the man with the inveterate vice of having nothing to say. He is superfluous even in a Sunday issue. He confounds tenuity with refinement, and publishes a volume on the strength of one etiolated idea. Say what you will about style, mere grammar will not make an author, even if the grammar is superb. A literary aspirant once wrote to a publisher that she could write well if she only had ideas. This idea of style is as injurious in what is classed as literature as in the daily papers.

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

Those smoothly rounded sentences, each one the assassin of a thought, those pastels in prose which are nothing but prose, and those extremely emaciated essays are neither journalism nor literature. Dilution is the one thing that is fatal, whether it is "literary" or not, and a high hoping for the eternal only makes it worse. No matter where the line be drawn, it should not include this, for things perish quicker for lack of substance than for lack of form. The real dread of the honest followers of either craft should be the dread of spreading themselves thin, and if the year's production of books could be piled up alongside its periodicals it would be hard to say which class had sinned the more. But this thing is certain. No member of either would be a whit the worse for the good qualities of the other.

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

VII

RUNNING AN ORACLE

ONE of the pleasantest lines of newspaper work is the composition of those editorial articles on foreign politics which unmask the designs of the great powers and explain what is known as a "world movement." It is work that confers dignity on the writer from the impressive nature of the material with which it deals. It is not scrutinized as sharply as other kinds of work, because it takes one's breath away at the start. Very few people, for example, distinguished between the articles on the Chinese situation which the newspapers were obliged to publish every other day. They like to see such articles on an editorial page as a sign that the paper is keeping up with the times; but so long as they all have the air of certainty they are all equally able and authoritative. The man who can speak familiarly as to what the "Russian Colossus" is up to, and what France thinks about it, has everything in his own hands. Nobody thinks of checking him off. That

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

familiar tone does the business. World politics afford the one sinecure in the newspaper profession. In general these articles conform to one of two types. There is the solemnly judicious article, which, though masterly, is found, on analysis, to be somewhat non-committal. And there is the article of mysterious sources.

Here is a model article of the former type on the future of China. "It looks very much indeed as if an acute crisis were impending in China," says the writer in the sure, firm style with which these experts approach their subjects. But the true spirit of this kind of writing appears in the following sentence: "Anything may happen in China in the next six months, or nothing may happen." That shows the practiced hand. The soundest editorial articles on world politics are built on these imperishable foundations. What, then, is China's future? That will depend on the issue of the next six months. If nothing happens, there is no reason to expect any very radical changes. If, on the other hand, things do happen, then changes of the deepest

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

and most far-reaching importance are almost certain to occur. These things being so, the writer says: "It may be well to look dispassionately at general conditions and at future prospects." What do we find? We notice first that the forces at work in China "are both internal and external;" there is a force that makes for progress and a force that does not. The rest is in keeping with this. The significant thing about it is permanence and universality. It will apply as well to the future of Austria-Hungary and the German empire when the occasion arises. The result of its success is the saying of obvious things with the air of having all the powers at the other end of a private wire.

To run these oracles all any one needs is a war rumor and a copy of the *Statesman's Year Book* and a solemn manner. If the news is true, then it is indeed serious. There are some aspects of the situation which you cannot but view with grave anxiety. Will the Russian bear show his claws? "It is not generally known that" and "People who look beneath the surface of things

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

say" are good and well-tried expressions. You should also own a few "undercurrents of political opinion." These are to be found at any time in a single article in a foreign review, but it is wiser not to quote the author, as it sounds better to say, "In certain quarters the view is held." The quickest way to get at the very core of world politics is through the pages of one of these articles. Some of the weightiest inside information articles, whose writer you might suppose had been hiding under the table at every cabinet meeting in Europe, are made in this way.

We have, of course, men who are well versed in these subjects, and who put their own brains into their work. But the point is that these qualifications are not necessary for the running of an oracle on foreign politics. With the weighty manner one fares quite as well. The man who says "Anything may happen in China in the next six months, or nothing may happen" has as large an audience. He is respected and liked. It is a comfortable and an honorable life, and in spite of competition the earnings are enormous in pro-

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

portion to the labor involved. As a people we may be suspicious about some things and not bad hands at a bargain, but the man who runs an oracle is apt to find us a good thing.

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

VIII

FOR WOMAN AND THE HOME

AN article published some time ago in an important London magazine shows what a serious-minded British editor sometimes thinks of his public. The writer tells us that woman should be womanly, that she should be intelligent and at the same time kind; that, "above all, nothing should be done to diminish the immense fund of affection stored up in women's hearts." "We might possibly spare science and philosophy," says he; "we might certainly spare many inventions, but we could not spare from the world a mother's love." And lest some of his readers may still be unconvinced, he adds that while it is better that woman should know "how to cook an appetizing dinner for the tired husband than how to chatter about Shelley," she ought not to be entirely untaught. He is radical on that point, arguing with much earnestness against leaving her in her wild native state, for she "is not likely to love husband, brother or child the

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

more because she is ignorant and helpless." But he advises caution in applying this principle. The wild woman who cooks may lose something in transition, just as strawberries lose flavor when cultivated, or gallinaceous birds when domesticated. How domesticate the partridge without diminishing the gamy flavor; how teach woman to read Shelley without loss of true womanhood? That is the problem. While opposed to anything like overeducation, he believes that the mind of woman should receive some attention for two reasons: First, she is a companion to man. He approves of this and thinks it ought to be encouraged. "Let the idea of companionship between man and woman prevail more," he says. Secondly, her education will be useful to the children. On this point, and in finally summing up, he says:

"Nothing could be more delightful, more helpful, both to mother and child, than a common interest in things of the mind. The children should not look on the mother as a kind of household slave who looks after the dinner and who packs them off to school; nor should the mother

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

think of the children as so many little faces and hands to be washed or so many little mouths to be fed. . . . Indeed, we suggest that a new and brighter meaning might be given to home by a judicious education and a wise liberty to her by whose loving activity and goodness home is made."

The article is unsigned, but it was probably written by a man. Most of this kind of writing is done by men, and there is a great deal of it. The significance of this particular case is that the thing appears in a magazine meant for full-grown men and women of this world, not for a constituency of apple-cheeked cherubs. But there is this much to be said for the writer: Of all subjects in current literature woman is the one that draws out the worst there is in man. An odd change comes over him when woman is his theme—a sort of sea-change, judged by the wateriness of the results. And does it please woman? Does the mother heart glow at the sight of the strong man simpering in his beard, and is there no mother head to take offense at him? Surely more things might be taken for granted

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

by the writer on women and the home. Let him try talking like this to her face and see what happens. That is a fair test. One thing that makes man write of woman as he does is the knowledge that she cannot get at him. Certainly you may read your Shelley, and even a little thinking will not hurt, but not too much, mind, and do not forget to beam on the tired husband. Heat his slippers for him, wash the children, cook the dinner; then crouch behind the storm door to spring out and beam the minute you hear him scuffling on the door mat. Beam thoroughly, then out with a blast of Shelley at him. There you have the true woman, though educated: mother heart true as steel, affections sound, husband fed, children washed, and yet the savage bride now reads light literature. Thus is the sex problem solved and civilization may go on with perfect confidence.

Woman is unfortunate in her advisers. What a time of it we should have if she deliberately set out to make home happy by the rules laid down for her. What with the routine beaming and the

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

scheduled companionship . and the memorized home thoughts, where would the tired husband be? You would find that haggard refugee nest-ing in a tree-top. But there is no danger of it. The only serious question is that of journalistic standards. Why do we dedicate to woman and the home the most demented portions of our periodicals?

Not in a spirit of chivalry, but of common fairness, I hold that there is no such intellectual disparity between the sexes as would appear from these writings. The women one ordinarily meets are not at the level of the usual woman's page or of the average magazine for women. Women read these things, of course, but chiefly for tech-nical information, for suggestions as to pickles or finger bowls, or things to put on hats—which occult and complicated matters have as much right to a literature of their own as entomology —and no one can despise the intellect that follows them in all their abstruse windings. But what I have in mind are the non-technical articles in regard to which man and woman are on an equal

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

footing. Why write so very far down just because you are writing for women? And why do women not resent the practice?

Here is a typical passage from a typical literary article in a woman's magazine. The writer explains for the benefit of women's clubs how Browning should be studied and what blessings result from the study. He says: "When one has mastered Browning's conception of the nature of love and of the ends of art and its spiritual significance, he is well on the way to the poet's view of life." Fancy a string of similar passages running through three or four pages, and you have a fair picture of what the woman of culture is supposed to like. It is true with the truth of the first spelling book. It is as irreproachable as regular breathing. But why are women thought to need it? That is the baffling part of the thing. Do not women know that the way to study a poet is to read his poems thoughtfully, and are there any of them that need be told that art has its inner meaning, life its deeper joys? Take this, for example: "Browning is primarily a poet and

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

should be approached as a poet." Why tell a woman that? Could she not guess it? Would she be likely to approach him as a plumber? And this suggests the general question that always troubles the male reader of these articles: If adult human beings who have had a fair chance in life still remain at the stage which this kind of writing implies, why bother with them at all? You cannot save them, certainly not by these means, for if they had in them a spark of affection for books they would rebel against this way of writing about books. That is the trouble with the woman's writer. There is nothing left of a good thing when he has once adapted it. And where is the benefit in knowing about books when you do not care for what is inside them? It is meritorious only in a librarian. It is no one's duty to be literary.

It seems a waste of time to blame people for writing platitudes, but that is not the point. The platitude must always be. What I protest against is that it should be so unevenly distributed between the sexes by our periodicals. And

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

why pretend that reading this kind of an article does anything to the mind? As well advise people to sleep with a volume of poems under their pillow in order to wake up "cultured" in the morning.

Women, of course, are themselves in part to blame for the woman's writer. They take him more seriously than men do, and when they do not take him seriously they are more patient with him than men would be. There is no doubt that those molluscous writers who fasten themselves to the reputations of dead geniuses, and say amiable things about books which they do not understand, have a disproportionately large feminine constituency. By merely praising Homer, Plato, Dante and Shakespeare, and by laying claim to certain large, vague sensations when they read them, it is possible to establish a literary standing. If they follow this up with an occasional good word for high ideals and the ends of art and the true conception of life, they may attain quite a high place in contemporary estimation. The thing has been done. And though the

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

woman's writer may have known at the start that what he said did not mean anything, this self-knowledge does not last. In his final stage he believes in himself. That is the last and lowest point he reaches.

After all, is he not harmless and even useful as an educator? There is this much harm in him: In so far as people read him they are kept from doing other things. That of itself is bad. They reach those absurd, straggling suburbs of literature, and there they stop. They read articles about books which describe other books, and so cultivate a sort of third cousinship to literature. Then the woman's writer is an awful example of what literature may do to a man. If association with masterpieces all his days leaves him in such a state, it must scare people away from masterpieces. There are dangers involved in his existence from whatever point you view him, though I admit that at first thoughts there is nothing in all nature that seems more innocuous than he.

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

IX

ON BEHALF OF OBSCURE VERSE

IT is a tame little affair, to be sure—the average poem of the magazines, and when I say average poem, I mean almost every poem that appears in them, for rarely does one venture to differ much from every other one. But it is easy to be too pessimistic about them, and if anyone will take the trouble to run through the old files he will arise feeling fairly cheerful in regard to the minor verse of his own generation. It is better than it used to be because it has a larger supply of antecedent verse to draw upon for imitation. It is a fuller and more composite echo. There is more of it than there used to be, but there is nothing depressing in that, because it has not outrun the increase in population. Another consoling thought is that a large part of the humdrum verse of to-day affords more training to the reader's wits. As between the commonplace verse that is perfectly intelligible and the commonplace verse that is obscure, the latter has this disciplin-

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

ary advantage. At least you work your mind, and even if you find nothing, the exercise has done you good. The mere value of a metrical rebus, you will say. Well, even that is something.

And this leads to the point I wish to emphasize. So long as the kernel of magazine verse remains what it is, I would not have it easier to be got at. I put in a plea for the continuance of this obscurity, and I do so with the more haste and earnestness because I have lately noticed a tendency to complain of it. "Now what in the world does she mean by that?" asks a reviewer with bitterness as he quotes two complicated sentences without verbs addressed by a young lady to one of her emotions. Mercy on us! The meaning is just what was meant to be withheld. Such a question ignores the rules of the game. If reviewers begin to act like that, they will soon destroy the industry altogether. The composition of this kind of magazine verse consists in this very secretiveness as to meanings. The performer takes a fairly simple and fairly obvious

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

thought and first writes it down in direct, cold prose. This done, it is carefully examined to see how well it lends itself to verbal entanglements. If it seems to have possibilities in this respect, the work of ensnarling is begun. Words are wound around it phrase by phrase till just the faintest suggestion of the thought peeps out through a crack in the verbiage. Then it is the reader's turn to guess what is inside. If it takes a good deal of time and worry, so much the better. He feels something of a sportsman's zest. He is rather glad to get it, even if it does not amount to much. To illustrate, let us take a concrete case. You want to say something about the dread of separation—whether of the soul from the body or the lover from his mistress, it matters not what. Take just that one situation. You snatch at many paraphrases and discard them one by one for lack of subtlety. Finally, after mousing around among words and muttering things like "foregleam of the ache of absence" and "ill-seeming shade of otherwhere" (which you see at a glance would never do in the

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

world as synonyms for incipient bereavement), let us suppose you hit on something rather queer, such, for example as “the germ of alibi.” It sounds foolish at first, but upon consideration may seem worth while, for it is an unusual collocation of words and hides the thought almost beyond chance of detection. Now if for every other simple phrase you can find so successful a substitute, if every turn of your thought can be made to twist itself into such remotely suggestive, such slenderly related language, you may produce a poem in the modern magazine manner. But it means work.

The “germ of alibi” may not be a very convincing illustration, though I may say in passing that it is taken from the collected verses of an excellent and very, very serious writer. Still in a measure it represents the aspiration of magazine verse. It betokens an eagerness for enigmatic charm. It is an elaborate tucking away of the humdrum, an obscuration of the insignificant, and that I believe is the characteristic of this sort of verse. And in saying so I wish to reg-

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

ister my hearty approval. Obscurity of style in these cases is a merciful thing. Not only that, but it gives a positive pleasure to two classes of readers. First, there are those who find excitement in the difficulties of the quest, who like to track the elusive thought to its lair. Secondly, there is the larger class that love the vague merely because it is vague and looks the bigger for its vagueness.

Therefore I am disturbed by the brutal stand-and-deliver attitude of certain reviewers who are forever holding up poems and demanding their meanings. And there is a special savagery in the prevailing practice of reviewing six or seven little volumes of collected magazine poems all in a bunch under the title of "Some Recent Verse." A review like that is a potter's field of poets. Again and again you will find a half dozen poets huddled together under a collective title and disposed of all at once, as a housemaid might kill flies with a twisted newspaper. Obscure magazine verse is not rightly appreciated. Reviewers do not remark the stress and strain that go to

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

its production. It represents fierce and unremitting toil, and its murkiness is not accidental, but deliberately and painfully wrought. A magazine versifier of to-day would never write:

“I saw the hole myself,” he cried.
“ ‘Twas four feet long and two feet wide.”

He would never exclaim:

“Twelve, didst thou say? Curse on those dozen villains.”

He would never fall with Wordsworth into such lines as:

O mercy, to myself I said,
What if Lucy should be dead?

He is more likely to reproduce the melody of Meredith’s much-quoted line:

The friable, and the grumous, dizzards both.

And for my part I prefer the latter model, for at least it stirs the curiosity.

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

X

IN DARKEST JAMES

SOME time ago, when Henry James wrote an essay on women that brought to my cheek the hot, rebellious blush, I said nothing about it, thinking that perhaps, after all, the man's style was his sufficient fig-leaf, and that few would see how shocking he really was. And, indeed, it had been a long time since the public knew what Henry James was up to behind that verbal hedge of his, though half-suspecting that he meant no good, because a style like that seemed just the place for guilty secrets. But those of us who had formed the habit of him early could make him out even then, our eyes having grown so used to the deepening shadows of his later language that they could see in the dark, as you might say. I say this not to brag of it, but merely to show that there were people who partly understood him even in *The Sacred Fount*, and he was clearer in his essays, especially in that wicked one on "George

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

Sand: *The New Life*," published in an American magazine.

Here he was as bold as brass, telling women to go ahead and do and dare, and praising the fine old hearty goings-on at the court of Augustus the Strong, and showing how they could be brought back again if women would only try. His impunity was due to the sheer laziness of the expurgators. They would not read him, and they did not believe anybody else could. They justified themselves, perhaps, by recalling passages like these in the *Awkward Age*:

"What did this feeling wonderfully appear unless strangely irrelevant."

"But she fixed him with her weary penetration."

"He jumped up at this, as if he couldn't bear it, presenting as he walked across the room a large, foolish, fugitive back, on which her eyes rested as on a proof of her penetration."

"My poor child, you're of a profundity."

"He spoke almost uneasily, but she was not too much alarmed to continue lucid."

"You're of a limpidity, dear man ! "

"Don't you think that's rather a back seat for one's best?"

"'A back seat?' she wondered, with a purity."

"Your aunt didn't leave me with you to teach you the slang of the day."

"'The slang?' she spotlessly speculated."

Arguing from this that he was bent more on

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

eluding pursuit than on making converts, they let things pass that in other writers would have been immediately rebuked. He had, in fact, written furiously against the proprieties for several years. "There is only one propriety," he said, "that the painter of life can ask of a subject: Does it or does it not belong to life?" He charged our Anglo-Saxon writers with "a conspiracy of silence," and taunted them with the fact that the women were more improper than the men. "Emancipations are in the air," said he, "but it is to women writers that we owe them." The men were cowards, rarely venturing a single coarse expression, but already in England there were pages upon pages of women's work so strong and rich and horrifying and free that a man could hardly read them. Halcyon days, they seemed to him, and woman the harbinger of a powerful Babylonish time when the improprieties should sing together like the morning stars. Not an enthusiastic person generally, he always warmed to this particular theme with generous emotion.

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

His essay on George Sand discussing what he calls the “new life,” cited the heart history of that author as “having given her sex for its new evolution and transformation the real standard and measure of change.” It was all recorded in Mme. Karénine’s biography, and Mme. Karénine, being a Russian with an “admirable Slav superiority to prejudice,” was able to treat the matter in a “large, free way.” A life so amorously profuse was sure to set an encouraging example, he thought. Her heart was like an hotel, occupied, he said, by “many more or less greasy males” in quick succession. He hoped the time would come when other women’s hearts would be as miscellaneous:

“In this direction their aim has been, as yet, comparatively modest and their emulation low; the challenge they have hitherto picked up is but the challenge of the average male. The approximation of the extraordinary woman has been, practically, in other words, to the ordinary man. Madame Sand’s service is that she planted the flag much higher; her own approximation, at least, was to the extraordinary. She reached him, she surpassed him, and she showed how, with

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

native dispositions, the thing could be done. These new records will live as the precious text-book, so far as we have got, of the business."

This was plain enough. Any other man would have been suppressed. In a literature so well policed as ours, the position of Henry James was anomalous. He was the only writer of the day whose unconventional notions did not matter. His dissolute and complicated Muse might say just what she chose. Perhaps this was because it would have been so difficult to expose him. Never did so much "vice" go with such sheltering vagueness. Whatever else may be said of James at this time, he was no tempter, and though the novels of this period deal only with unlawful passions, they make but chilly reading on the whole. It is a land where the vices have no bodies and the passions no blood, where nobody sins because nobody has anything to sin with. Why should we worry when a spook goes wrong? For years James did not create one shadow-casting character. His love affairs, illicit though they be, are so stripped to their motives that they seem

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

no more enticing than a diagram. A wraith proves faithless to her marriage vow, elopes with a bogie in a cloud of words. Six phantoms meet and dine, three male, three female, with two thoughts apiece, and, after elaborate geometry of the heart, adultery follows like a Q. E. D. Shocking it ought to be, but yet it is not. Ghastly, tantalising, queer, but never near enough human to be either good or bad. To be a sinner, even in the books you need some carnal attributes—lungs, liver, tastes, at least a pair of legs. Even the fiends have palpable tails; wise men have so depicted them. No flesh, no frailty; that may be why our sternest moralists licensed Henry James to write his wickedest. They saw that whatever the moral purport of these books, they might be left wide open in the nursery.

To those who never liked him he is the same in these writings as in those before and since. They complain that even at his best he is too apt to think that when he has made a motive he has made a man. Nevertheless, though the world of his better novels is small, it is always credible—

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

humanity run through a sieve, but still humanity. During this dark period his interests seemed to drop off one by one, leaving him shut in with his single theme—the rag, the bone and the hank of hair, the complicated amours of skeletons. They called it his later manner, but the truth is, it was a change in the man himself. He saw fewer things in this spacious world than he used to see, and the people were growing more meagre and queer and monotonous, and it was harder and harder to break away from the stump his fancy was tied to.

In *The Wings of the Dove* there were signs of a partial recovery. There were people who saw no difference between it and *The Sacred Fount* or *The Awkward Age*, but they were no friends of his. By what vice of introspection he got himself lashed to that fixed idea it is impossible to say, but it was clear that neither of those books was the work of a mind entirely free. In one aspect it was ridiculous; but if one laughed, it was with compunctions, for in another aspect it was exceedingly painful. This only from the

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

point of view of his admirers. It is not forgotten that there is the larger class (for whom this world in the main was made) to whom he is merely ridiculous. They do not see why thoughts so unwilling to come out need be extracted.

To be sure in *The Wings of the Dove* there is the same absorption in the machinery of motive and in mental processes the most minute. Through page after page he surveys a mind as a sick man looks at his counterpane, busy with little ridges and grooves and undulations. There are chapters like wonderful games of solitaire, broken by no human sound save his own chuckle when he takes some mysterious trick or makes a move that he says is "beautiful." He has a way of saying "There you are" that is most exasperating, for it is always at the precise moment at which you know you have utterly lost yourself. There is no doubt that James's style is often too puffed up with its secrets. Despite its air of immense significance, the dark, unfathomed cave of his ocean contain sometimes only the same sort of gravel you could have picked up on the shore.

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

I have that from deep sea thinkers who have been down him. But though this unsociable way of writing continues through *The Wings of the Dove*, it came nearer than any other novel that he had published for some years to the quality of his earlier work. It deals with conditions as well as with people. Instead of merely souls anywhere, we have men and women living in describable homes. It would be hard to find in those other novels anything in the spirit of the following passage, which is fairly typical of much in this:

“It was after the children’s dinner . . . and the two young women were still in the presence of the crumpled tablecloth, the dispersed pinafores, the scraped dishes, the lingering odour of boiled food. Kate had asked, with ceremony, if she might put up a window a little, and Mrs. Condrip had replied, without it, that she might do as she liked. She often received such inquiries as if they reflected in a manner on the pure essence of her little ones. . . . Their mother had become for Kate—who took it just for the effect of being their mother—quite a different thing from the mild Marian of the past; Mr. Condrip’s widow expansively obscured that im-

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

age. She was little more than a ragged relic, a plain prosaic result of him, as if she had somehow been pulled through him as through an obstinate funnel, only to be left crumpled and useless and with nothing in her but what he accounted for."

Not that the passage shows him at his best, but it shows him as at least concerned with the setting of his characters.

It is not worth while to attempt an outline of the story. Those who have done so have disagreed in essentials. It is impossible to hit off in a few words characters that James has picked out for their very complexity; and the story counts for little with him as against the business of recording the play of mind. One does not take a watch to pieces merely to tell the time of day; and with James analysis is the end in itself.

If the obscurity of the language were due to the idea itself, and if while he tugs at an obstinate thought you could be sure it was worth the trouble, there would be no fault to find, but to him one thing seems as good as another when he

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

is mousing around in a mind. It is a form of self-indulgence. He is as pleased with the motives that lead nowhere as with anything else. It is his even emphasis that most misleads. He writes a staccato chronicle of things both great and small, like a constitutional history half made up of the measures that never passed. And in one respect he does not play fairly. He makes his characters read each other's minds from clues that he keeps to himself. To invent an irreverent instance, suppose I were a distinguished author with a psychological bent and wished to represent two young people as preternaturally acute. I might place them alone together and make them talk like this:

“If——” she sparkled.

“If!” he asked. He had lurched from the meaning for a moment.

“I might”——she replied abundantly.

His eye had eaten the meaning—“Me!” he gloriously burst.

“Precisely,” she thrilled. “How splendidly you do understand.”

I, the distinguished author, versed in my own psychology—the springs of my own marionettes

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

—I understand it perfectly. For me there are words a-plenty. But is it fair to you, the reader?

Nevertheless—and this is the main point about Henry James—by indefinable means and in spite of wearisome prolixity he often succeeds in his darkest books in producing very strange and powerful effects. It is a lucky man who can find a word for them. Things you had supposed incommunicable certainly come your way. These are the times when we are grateful to him for pottering away in his nebulous workshop among the things that are hard to express. Even when he fails we like him for making the attempt. We like him for going his own gait, though he leaves us straggling miles behind. We cannot afford at this time to blame any writer who is a little reckless of the average mind.

Consider the case of Browning and all that his lusty independence has done for us. Browning was quite careless of the average mind; he would as lief wreck it. He was careless of anybody else's mind, so bent was he on indulging his

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

own. His question was not, What will you have? but What do I feel like doing? and readers had to take their chances, some to give him up as too deep, and others to beat their brains for inner meanings where there were none. He liked life so well that he prized its most vapid moments and expressed his mind at its best and at its worst, wrote sometimes as other men drum on window-panes, catalogued a lot of objects he liked the look of, relaxed in verse, ate in it, sometimes slept in it, used it, in short, for so many strange little personal purposes, that reading it sometimes seems an intrusion. Hence, he is quite as much a puzzle to the too thoughtful as he is to those who prefer not to think, for a great man's nonsense is sure to drive his commentators mad looking for a message. Browning differed from others not so much in the greatness of his mind as in the fact that he showed more of it. He seems obscure sometimes because people are unprepared for that degree of confidence. Then, there are certain preconceived notions as to the limits of literature, an expectation of large, plain things,

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

of truth with a door-knob, of smooth, symmetrical thoughts, not at all in the shape they come to the mind, but neatly trimmed for others to see when they leave it. No living man understands Browning; but for that matter, few men understand their wives. It is not fatal to enjoyment. People who are perfectly clear to each other are simply keeping things back. Any man would be a mystery if you could see him from the inside, and Browning puzzles us chiefly because we are not accustomed to seeing a mind exposed to view. It is the man's presence, not his message, that we care for in Browning's books; his zest for everything, his best foot and his worst foot, his deepest feelings and his foolishness, and the tag-ends of his dreams. They are not the greatest poems in the world, but there was the greatest pleasure in the making of them. It is just the place for a writer to go and forget his minor literary duties, the sense of his demanding public, the obligation of the shining phrase, the need of making editorial cats jump, the standing orders for a *jeu d'esprit*.

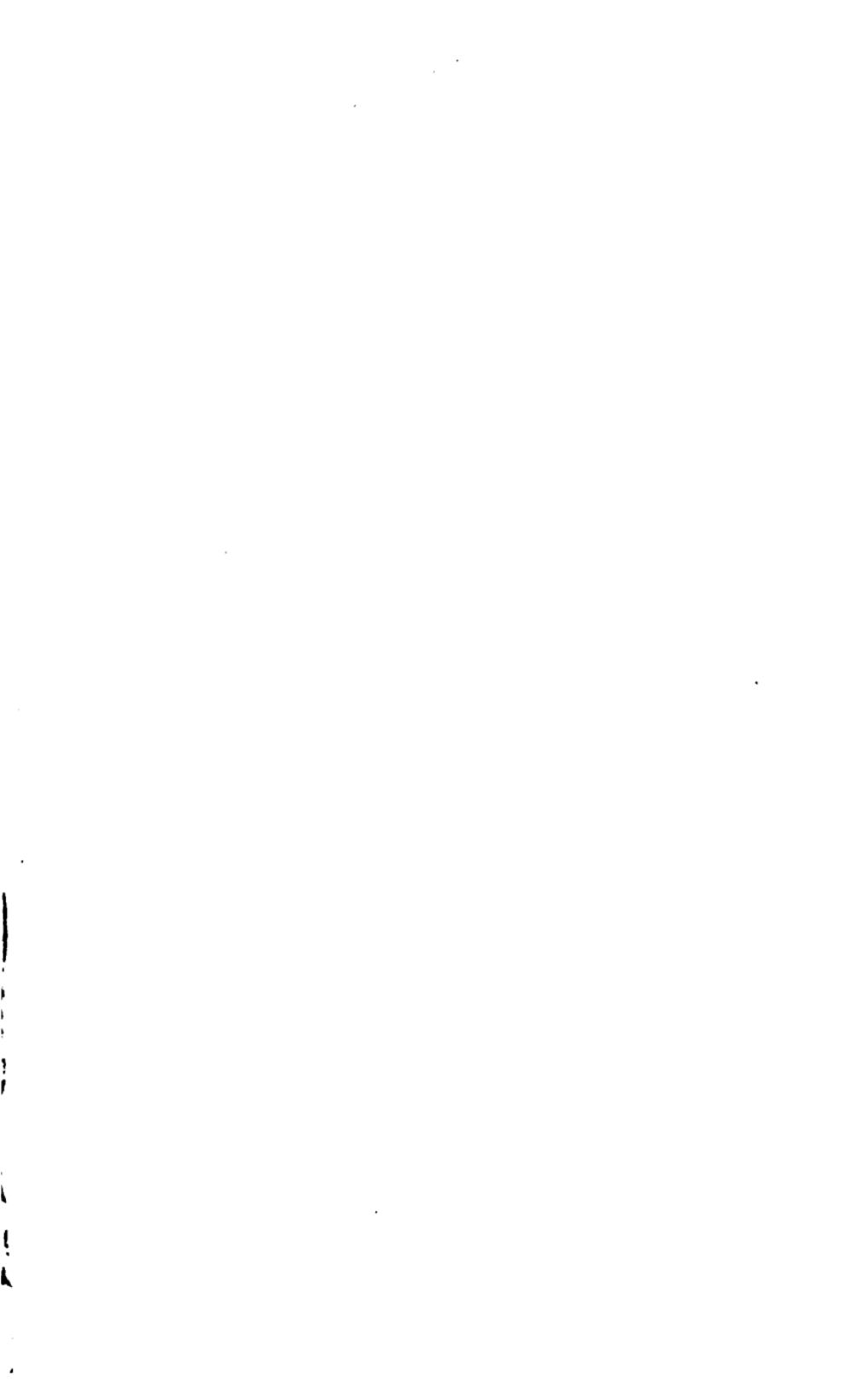
THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

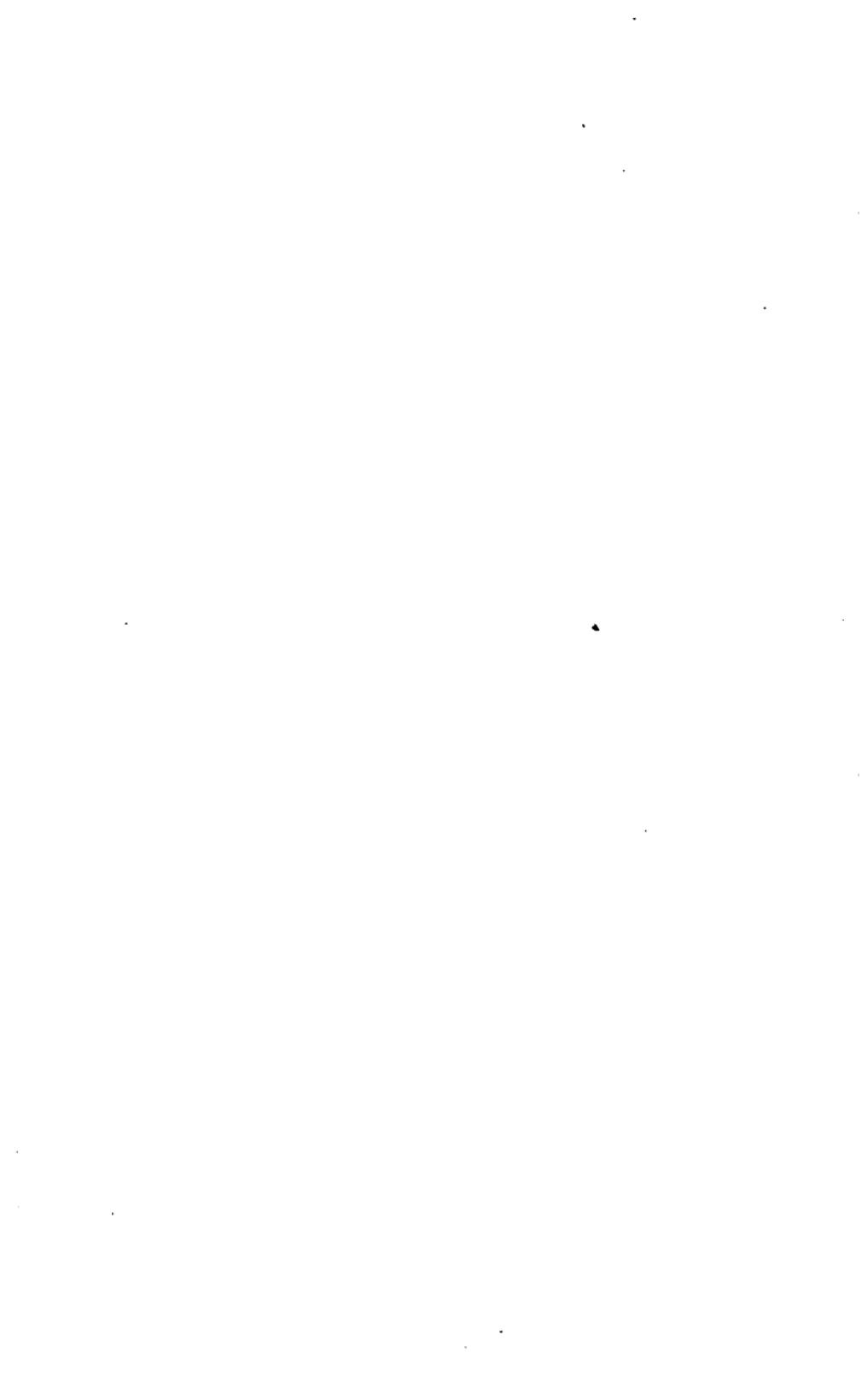
It is also the place for a reader to go who is a little weary of the books which are written with such patient regard for the spiritual limitations of the public. And part of the obscurity of Henry James springs from the same pleasing and honorable egotism.

THE END

1

gw
02









NOV 8 - 1944

